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TIFFANY JOY COLE

**Peculiar Paradise: A Practice-Led Investigation into
the Allure of Collecting Kitsch Objects**

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Tiffany Joy Cole, hereby declare that the thesis presented here is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tiffany Joy Cole', written in a cursive style.

Date: 17/11/2018

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PECULIAR PARADISE: A PRACTICE-LED INVESTIGATION INTO THE ALLURE OF COLLECTING KITSCH OBJECTS

Abstract

This practice-led research in painting explores, and aims to reconcile, my experience of the conflicting values associated with the role of kitsch in the pleasures and cultural values of Australian domestic life, with the cultural and aesthetic values of high art, where kitsch has traditionally been deemed as of low cultural status.

I engage with painting as a medium that can encompass and portray experiences of paradox and multiple perspectives, to investigate, represent, and resolve this collision of worlds. I focus on my family's collection of kitsch ornamental objects as a particular example of this aspect of material culture, to explore more broadly the attraction these objects hold, and the personal and cultural significance of such collections.

This research is contextualised by historical and contemporary perspectives on kitsch. I argue that the traditional critiques of kitsch of Clement Greenberg, Hermann Broch and Gillo Dorfles are limited in their scope and conflict with my own experience. Taking a multidisciplinary approach, I draw from recent sociology, cultural theory, psychology and philosophy to make a case for the aesthetic, psychological and sociological value of the objects in my family collections and identify their positive and redeeming qualities. Key positive re-evaluations of kitsch I draw on include writing by Sam Binkley and Celeste Olalquiaga. Recent cultural theory on collecting as a creative and critical process as promoted by Susan Stewart, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard and Annette Money also contribute significantly to my research. My affectionate perspective on kitsch is also contextualised and compared with contemporary art practices engaged with kitsch: including the work of Jeff Koons, Pip and Pop, Audrey Flack, Ricky Swallow and Lucy Culliton.

My methodology involves investigating ways to re-present the objects, through combining traditional highly realistic oil painting methods drawn from the Northern European Baroque, with contemporary modes of three-dimensional display. I engage painting's potential to evoke the material, formal and perceptual properties of specific ornamental kitsch objects, to explore their appeal and generate a heightened sensory appreciation of their characteristic qualities. In exploring a range of ways of depicting and displaying these paintings as objects, I consider the theatricality of object display,

ranging from the modestly domestic to the spectacular palatial interiors of Rococo Europe. My painting practice becomes a means of resolving this aesthetic conflict by engaging in aspects of collecting and curating, and the quality of attention I bring to the depiction of the objects I portray.

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duct%5D=75025&tx_lempertzfrontend_product%5Bcatalogue%5D=297&tx_lempertzfrontend_product%5Bcontroller%5D=Product&tx_lempertzfrontend_product%5Baction%5D=show&cHash=c6c53fde81bc222d6f3f7b15db551ea2 (accessed 20 November 2016).

Figs. 154,155. Colour tests, blue tones and gold leaf, a range of bright colours and gold leaf.

Figs. 156,157,158,159. *Eternal Spring* (2017, details). Oil on and metal leaf on wood, dimensions variable. Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 160. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing* (1767). Oil on canvas, 81 x 64.2 cm. Wallace Collection, London.

<https://www.wallacecollection.org/collection/les-hazards-heureux-de-lescarpolette-swing/#&gid=1&pid=1> (accessed 16 March 2018).

Fig. 161. *Eternal Spring* (2017, installation view). Oil and metal leaf on wood, dimensions variable. Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 162. Lilac Cabinet, Linderhof Palace.

<http://www.schlosslinderhof.de/englisch/palace/pict05.htm> (accessed 12 March 2018).

Fig. 163. Pastel blue-themed interior, Cabinet de la Méridienne, Versailles Palace.

<https://www.lejournaldesarts.fr/patrimoine/le-bureau-de-marie-antoinette-de-retour-versailles-107430> (accessed 12 March 2018).

Fig. 164,165. *Eternal Spring* (2017, details). Oil and metal leaf on wood, dimensions variable. Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 166. Beth Katleman, *Folly* (installation view, 2010). Porcelain, wire, steel rods, and heat-shrink tubing, 175 x 243 x 28 cm. Collection Unknown.

<http://www.bethkatleman.com/work/index.php?iid=29&cid=4> (accessed 3 July 2016).

Fig. 167. Beth Katleman, *Folly* (detail, 2010).

<http://www.bethkatleman.com/work/index.php?iid=29&cid=4&mid=98> (accessed 3 July 2016).

Fig.168. Nicola Dickson, *Patterns of Empire- Nature* (2013). Acrylic and oil on linen, 148 x 200 cm. Collection Unknown.

<http://nicoladickson.com/paintings/zvzerw8c5mzoc5eqky6zbhoxg1iyck> (accessed 20 December 2016).

Appendix:

Fig. 169. Installation View of *Eternal Spring* and *Season to Taste*. Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 170. *Season to Taste* (2015). Oil and gold leaf on wood, dimensions variable.
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 171. Installation view of *Season to Taste* and *Tizzy Mantelpiece*. Photograph:
Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 172. *Tizzy Mantelpiece* (2015). Acrylic and oil on Perspex, dimensions variable.
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 173. Installation view of *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* and *Scents of Nostalgia*.
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 174. *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* (2016). Oil on wood, dimensions variable.
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 175. Installation view of *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* and *Scents of Nostalgia*. Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 176. *Scents of Nostalgia* (2016). Oil on wood, dimensions variable. Photograph:
Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 177. Installation view of *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams*, *Scents of Nostalgia* and *Eternal Spring*. Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Fig. 178. *Eternal Spring* (2017). Oil and metal leaf on wood, dimensions variable.
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie.

Introduction: *A Peculiar Paradise*

This practice-led doctoral research addresses my experience of a collision of worlds. The first is the world of my upbringing in suburban Australia, in a domestic setting full of a treasured collection of objects generally classified as kitsch. The second is my immersion as an artist in the history, tradition and contemporary practice of painting. My connection and fascination for both of these worlds created a quandary that formed the basis of this research: an experience of conflicting values between the cultural values and pleasures of suburban Australian domestic life in relation to the role of kitsch, with the cultural and aesthetic values and language of high art, where kitsch has been traditionally denigrated as 'bad taste' and of low cultural status. My research became a journey of investigating the complexity of this conflict between these two realms, where I tested ways to convey my experience of conflict in order to reconcile it, and to consider the broader implications of the place of kitsch in visual art and culture. I used painting as a means to think through how these worlds collide, to explore this problem visually, employing the medium as a field that can encompass and represent relations of paradox and multiple perspectives.

This research aims to challenge the limiting, conventionally negative views of kitsch as promoted from the 1930s by such theorists as Clement Greenberg, Hermann Broch and Gillo Dorfles, to offer a fresh and affectionate interpretation. I look to contemporary re-evaluations from a diverse range of disciplines including sociology, psychology, philosophy and cultural theory to support my positive perspective, arguing that the kinds of kitsch objects in this collection represent qualities of aesthetic, psychological and sociological value. I contextualise my work within the history of the genre of still life painting and compare my own approach to engaging with the theme with contemporary art practices that range from ironic to celebratory attitudes towards kitsch. To confine my enquiry to artists working within a similar material culture to that in which I operate, I limit my research to artists from contemporary Western culture.¹

Leading up to this research, my practice was driven by a sense of wonder in how a painting can evoke the appearance of material reality and, in particular, the realism displayed in the still life genre. The rich description of material and surface qualities in such paintings as *Still Life with Oysters, Fruits and Porcelain Bowl* (1660-69, fig. 1) by Northern Baroque artist Abraham Mignon (1640-79), captivates my attention, and transports me to a realm of another time and place. I imagine reaching in to taste the Spanish grapes and pomegranate seeds, their surface texture is so convincingly

¹ I avoid references to Japanese kitsch and notions of cuteness; for example, those which involve different cultural associations.

described. The fine detail of the painting lures me in to suspend my disbelief and imaginatively animate the world depicted. Curator Jochen Sander describes this effect:

To this day, still lifes captivate us with their magic of things, with their close-up views of objects no longer living but far from lifeless...²



Fig. 1. Abraham Mignon, *Still Life with Oysters, Fruits and Porcelain Bowl* (1660-69)

Inspired by the rich historical tradition of this genre, I employed naturalistic painting effects to represent contemporary subject matter. Rather than depicting grandiose subjects, however, I used the venerated conventions of oil painting to focus on the small and overlooked. My aim was to transform our regard for the little things in nature, such as small beetles and snails, by depicting them with a time-laden approach to the craft of painting (figs. 2,3).

I focussed on the overlooked in nature, my fascination with realism and the pleasure of rendering different surfaces with paint. In my doctoral investigation, I extended this exploration to a subject close to my heart, which I had not previously addressed in a focussed way: the pleasures and values I find in kitsch objects.

² Jochen Sander, introduction to *The Magic of Things: Still-Life Painting 1500-1800*, ed. Jochen Sander (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 13.



Fig. 2. (left) *Inhabitants: Rhinoceros Beetle* (2008)
Fig. 3. (right) *Illuminated Encounter: Snail* (2012)

The collision I examine in this research project draws from my experience of growing up in a home full of collected objects that are generally classified as kitsch: objects for which I hold great affection and find aesthetically captivating. Like bower birds, my mother and stepfather, Sue and Mike, have collected things which shimmer, glint and sparkle to decorate their home (fig. 4). Over time, the house has become an Aladdin's cave of mystery and wonder. Such objects include lustreware porcelain swan ornaments, Avon perfume bottles from the 1950s, figurative salt and pepper shakers, handmade doilies, and seashells found during trips to the ocean. Many of these objects belong to Australian popular culture from various eras, and are souvenirs and objects associated with the collectors' life histories. Most items derive their forms from nature (animals, birds, shells and so on), creating a kind of fantasy interior habitat that I find both captivating and comforting.



Fig. 4. Kitchen hutch display (2015)

My research focusses on this extensive family collection (which in this thesis I refer to as 'the collection') as a particular example of kitsch material culture, to examine more

broadly the aesthetic and psycho-sociological value that I find in such objects. While I examine the range of aesthetic characteristics and the personal value that the objects hold for the collectors, Sue and Mike, I come to see the ultimate focus of this project as being my own creative and emotional response as a painter to these objects, which form such a distinctive part of my family culture.

With these aims and parameters in mind, a number of key research questions emerge. What exactly does this conflict involve? How does my positive experience of my family's collection conflict with historic, conventional views of kitsch expressed in formal discourse? What are the particular pleasures and values that I find in these objects, and how might I portray this to convey this experience of collision? How might my paintings challenge traditional, negative views on kitsch culturally, and aesthetically, to contribute to re-assessments of kitsch in contemporary visual arts?

To introduce the theoretical and artistic fields within which I contextualise my research, I will outline the evolution of theoretical discourse on the cultural value of kitsch and establish my position: that kitsch holds aesthetic and sociological value. Then, in Chapter One, I discuss the theoretical context of this research project in more depth and analyse the positive features that I find in the collection.

In order to understand the nature of this collision, I study the range of theoretical discourse on kitsch to ask: What does the term kitsch mean, how has kitsch been viewed in cultural discourse, and what status has it held historically? Conventional negative views in socio-historical and socio-cultural discourse, proposed by such theorists as Greenberg, Broch, Dorfles and Kulka, consider kitsch in relation to art as its inauthentic antithesis, and associated with uneducated popular taste. These views conflict with my contemporary, positive experience. Seeking alternative views to support my conviction that kitsch holds positive and redeeming qualities, I draw from re-assessments from a range of disciplines, specifically from the writing of Sam Binkley, Celeste Olalquiaga, Daniel Miller and Alain de Botton, among others.

Investigating the psycho-sociological value of the collection leads me to broader questions related to the practice of personal collecting. What is the value of collecting and displaying objects in the home? I turn to writing by Susan Stewart, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Peter Schwenger and Alain de Botton, among others, who discuss how, through processes of selection, organisation and display, a collector can create an interior space that provides emotional assurance through reflecting and validating their passions, identity, and aspirations. I also examine the historical

precedent of the collection – the Wunderkammer, referencing writer Patrik Mauries – to examine the origins of categorising objects within a display to organise knowledge and inspire wonder.

My research is situated within the field of contemporary visual art practices that engage with the idea of kitsch. I consider artists who express a range of perspectives on kitsch and vernacular culture that include ironic, affectionate, and sympathetic perspectives, as well as more complex and nuanced responses. These include: American photorealist Audrey Flack; Australian painter Lucy Culliton; Australian sculptor Ricky Swallow; Australian installation artist Pip and Pop; American painter Cassie Marie Edwards, and American ceramicist Debra Broz. American Postmodern artist Jeff Koons' work (fig. 5), which I argue suggests an ambivalence and ironic view of kitsch, offers a counterpoint to my approach.



Fig. 5. Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988)

Just as the tension between my positive, personal association with kitsch and the predominantly negative critical assessment of kitsch is aesthetically and sociologically complex, so my challenge as a painter representing my experience of these objects is similarly complex. I engage in a range of approaches to explore my experience of this collision of worlds, bypassing, indeed challenging, Pop and Postmodern ironic perspectives in order to find my own means of reflecting on these things. Significantly I draw on my appreciation of the history of still life painting as a tradition of artists who have interrogated aspects of the material culture of their day. In various ways, I set out to tune my approach as painter to showcase the positive and redeeming aspects of this collection. Through a combination of highly realistic painting methods dating back to the 15th century, with experiments in contemporary modes of display, I explore and test ways to represent my experience of cultural and aesthetic collision to ultimately perform a resolution of this conflict.

I use painting as a mode of visual investigation to examine the nature of the objects and their meaning. In doing so, I draw from philosophies of art associated with the Northern Baroque period, where the processes of observing and recording the visual world via drawing and painting were considered a science-like enquiry. In *The Art of Describing: Dutch art of the Seventeenth Century*, American art historian Svetlana Alpers argues that artists were considered contributors to greater knowledge via their close observation.³ I adopt this perspective, using painting as a mode of investigation to analyse the visual features of, and my response to, the objects. I also engage in painting as a mode of thinking, spending time reflecting on the nature of my aesthetic experience and the personal significance the objects hold. As psychologist Sherry Turkle puts it: “We think with the things we love, we love the things we think with.”⁴



Fig. 6. Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with Turkey Pie* (1627)

Via painting, I explore the material qualities and optical effects specific to the collection – particularly shine and iridescence – to examine the nature of my encounter with these objects and the pleasure this evokes. This is informed by the close observation of Northern Baroque still life traditions, exemplified in such works as *Still Life with Turkey Pie* (1627, fig. 6) by Pieter Claesz (1597-1661) and writing on shine and reflection by art historian Ernst Gombrich and curator Jonathan Miller.

Through a meticulous and detailed approach to observing and rendering the objects, I convey my sustained attention and fascination with them, as well as portray the

³ Alpers quotes, “attentive looking, transcribed by the hand... led to the recording of the multitude of things that make up the visible world. In the seventeenth century this was celebrated as giving basic access to knowledge and understanding of the world.” Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 72.

⁴ Sherry Turkle, introduction to *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. Sherry Turkle (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), 5.

ornaments as particular and personally valuable. I draw from artist Ruth Waller's writing on how paintings communicate a "way of seeing" and cultural historian Celeste Olalquiaga's argument that mass produced kitsch objects can become unique through being invested with sentimental value.^{5,6}

I reference Northern Baroque still life painting to counter traditional assumptions regarding the aesthetic value of cheap, mass produced kitsch objects, and to convey the faux luxury and glamour of kitsch as worthy of aesthetic appreciation. I explore how the attention brought to the highly realistic technique of my painting works to impart an aesthetic appreciation of the cultural, material and optical complexity of the things my family collects. In doing so, I refer to art historian Norman Bryson's reflections on how the technical skills in the craft of painting add a level of cultural sophistication to objects portrayed.⁷

To draw focus to our perceptual experience of the objects portrayed, and to convey their significance as a domestic collection, a range of approaches to three-dimensional display are explored. These involve emphasising the materiality of the depicted objects as cut-out freestanding forms, 1:1 scale, as well as using various perspectival devices to integrate them with the installation space. As Norman Bryson puts it, I *re-present*, rather than represent the objects.⁸ To imply the personal significance of the objects as a collection, I test a range of spatial configurations that reflect aspects of domestic curation and display, considering the symbolic significance of the mantelshelf as analysed by sociologist Rachel Hurdley. Pattern and silhouette are explored to allude to the domestic realm. My approach to display is contextualised in relation to installation art and trompe l'oeil practices, where I identify my methods as distinct from these fields and more closely related to conventions of theatre set design, and the "picture sculptures" of Alex Katz.⁹

* * *

Chapter One presents a literature review, which outlines the key theoretical and artistic references that situate my research, and an analysis of the formal and thematic

⁵ Ruth Waller, "From Van Eyck to Virtual," *Australian Art Monthly*, 22, (2002): 24.

⁶ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17.

⁷ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 124.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 79.

⁹ Zdenek Felix coins the term "picture sculpture" to describe Katz's freestanding paintings. For further analysis of my installation approach, see pages 60-62 and 83. Zdenek Felix, introduction to *Alex Katz: Cut Outs*, ed. Zdenek Felix (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 9.

characteristics of the collection. It is here I establish my argument that kitsch holds aesthetic and psycho-sociological value. The three chapters that follow describe the chronological development of my studio-based research and my fieldwork, where I demonstrate how these theoretical texts and artworks inform and influence my approach in the studio. These chapters are divided according to three key phases, with each describing the devising and evaluation of three bodies of work.

Chapter Two describes the creation of the first three artworks: *Heirloom*, *Lustrefish* and *Nautical Objects*. I focus on investigating the fascination the collection holds in terms of the attraction the objects hold for my family, my own affection for them, and the sense of collision I experience when confronted by the traditional low regard for this aspect of material culture. I begin investigating the motivations and processes involved in the practice of collecting and the role of categorisation and modes of constructing personal meaning via processes of selection and curation. I analyse the significance of the key material qualities of shine and iridescence and, in the studio, take on the challenges of portraying these optical experiences in painting. I test a number of ways to convey my fascination and regard for the objects, meticulously rendering their appearance, exploring how this might challenge the low aesthetic status of the kitsch ornaments I depict. I begin to consider methods to draw focus to the objects portrayed and suggest their personal value by displaying the paintings as three-dimensional presentations.

In Chapter Three, the works *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, *Season to Taste* and *Miscellaneous Objects* focus on examining the appeal of the range of aesthetic categories in the collection to consider the pleasures and sociological value of collecting them. I discuss the faux aspects of kitsch: faux glamour and faux preciousness; and the kitsch portrayal of a sweetened, cute world. Categorisation and the allure of collecting multiple objects is also considered in more depth. Ways portraying shine can impart a sensation of glamour are further investigated, as well as how meticulous craftsmanship can elevate the low aesthetic status of objects, and portray them as unique. I extend my exploration of three-dimensional display, by testing Perspex as a painting support, and by creating laser-cut shaped painting supports to highlight a sense of the material presence of the objects portrayed within the gallery space. Releasing objects from a portrayal of their original context shifts my relation to them, spurring the development of imaginative approaches to convey their significance as a domestic collection. I introduce the doily as a symbolic motif, as well as and gilding, appropriated from altarpiece panel painting. I also use the mantelshelf and wallpaper pattern to suggest the domestic realm, integrating more intuitive making methods to inspire pleasure. In conclusion, I discover that I am partaking in collecting myself, selecting and curating

the objects in my own way, engaging with the theatrical nature of domestic collection and display.

At this point, I embark on fieldwork to galleries and cultural sites in Europe and, in Chapter Four, I discuss the influence of this on my research, with a focus on Rococo decorative arts.

In the works that follow I focus on engaging with the collection with increasing autonomy, devising lyrical methods to convey the personal value of the objects and the imaginative, theatrical potential of the collection. The works *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* and *Scents of Nostalgia* mark a period of consolidating previous research and technical developments, where I identify the prospect of addressing the aesthetic conflict that drives my research by engaging in my own art direction and curation, focussing on my appreciation of the particular kitsch aesthetic that the collection represents. This informs the final work *Eternal Spring*, where I address and resolve my research question by highlighting the collision between high art and kitsch in a work that enables the two realms to coexist.

Chapter One: *The Collision*

Introduction

As outlined above, this research addresses my experience of a collision of worlds: a disconnect between my affection for, and identification with, my family collection of objects, commonly referred to as kitsch, and my immersion in the history, tradition and contemporary practice of painting – a cultural realm where kitsch traditionally holds negative associations.

Leading up to my doctoral research, my practice was driven by a fascination with the capacity of highly realistic painting to create a sense of wonder. I was concerned with exploring and paying homage to the overlooked or underappreciated, in relation to my personal experience of the world. Drawing on this and my sense of aesthetic collision, my doctorate investigates how my painting practice can encompass and represent relations of paradox and multiple perspectives, and open up a space where complex and nuanced ideas, states and sensations can be experienced, via the specifics of personal experience. In doing so, this project ultimately seeks to reconcile conflicting experiences, by creating artworks that enable them to coexist.

To better explain the complexities of this collision of worlds, in this chapter I consider the definition of kitsch and the complex history and highly divergent range of kitsch theory. I consider the significance of the practice of collecting and then explore how kitsch has been considered in the visual arts thus far, locating my practice in relation to contemporary examples. Following this, I analyse the characteristics of kitsch evident in the objects I study, proposing that they possess a range of positive and redeeming qualities, which hold aesthetic and psycho-sociological value. My research was informed by European fieldwork, which allowed me to investigate at first hand the Rococo precedents that the kitsch collection imitates, the notion of the opulent interior, and the painting technique of glazing that enables an effect of splendour and high realism (a topic discussed later in Chapter Four).

Definition of *Kitsch*

The term *kitsch* purportedly emerged in the markets of Munich in the late 19th century and was used to describe “cheap, popular and marketable pictures and sketches”.¹⁰ In German, it roughly translates as ‘trash’ or ‘cheap finery’.¹¹ One suggestion is that the term is drawn from the German term *verkitschen* – to cheapen.¹² By the end of the 1920s *kitsch* had become an international expression.¹³ Initially it applied specifically to painting; however, it was later extended to other artistic disciplines.¹⁴ Eventually the term became used to describe the commercialised material culture that had developed as a result of the Industrial Revolution in Britain in the 19th century, where the advent of mass production led to a shift from a “handicraft economy to one dominated by industry and machine manufacturing”.¹⁵ According to the *Tate Gallery: Glossary of Art Terms*, *kitsch* is a word now used in the English language to describe “particularly cheap, vulgar and sentimental forms of popular and commercial culture”.¹⁶

Historical *Kitsch* Theory

Historically, critical theory concerning *kitsch* is varied and complex. Most early and foundational discourse examines *kitsch* from socio-historical and socio-cultural perspectives that focus on identifying it as an antithesis to art and as the height of bad taste. Although this theory focusses on *kitsch* in relation to the visual arts, such as in painting, it pertains to generation of the concept more broadly. This is because, as Tomas Kulka describes, the analysis of *kitsch* inherently involves aesthetic evaluation and issues pertaining to art appreciation.¹⁷ Early theorists critique *kitsch* as a corrupt impostor; a genuine threat to true culture. This anti-*kitsch* sentiment, which is still influential today, began with American art critic Clement Greenberg’s 1939 landmark essay, *Avant Garde and Kitsch*, which promoted a modernist agenda. It was followed by key texts by Austrian novelist Hermann Broch and Italian art critic Gillo Dorfles in the 1960s. For the purposes of my PhD research I consider three key themes common to early critiques of *kitsch*: that it is a fake form of art; that it holds no artistic value, and

¹⁰ Roger Scruton, “The Strangely Enduring Power of *Kitsch*,” *BBC News Magazine*, 12 December 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30439633> (accessed 10 December 2016).

¹¹ Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York : Bell Publishing Company, 1969), front dustjacket.

¹² Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 41.

¹⁵ “Industrial Revolution,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution> (accessed 10 August 2017).

¹⁶ “*Kitsch*,” *Tate Gallery: Glossary of Art Terms*. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/k/kitsch> (accessed 11 December 2016).

¹⁷ Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, x.

that it is deceptive in nature. I will then explain my experience that conflicts with this traditional theory.

Fake Art

Gaudy imitations, sensational twists, spurious “re-creations” of genuine artistic achievements to placate the cultural yearnings of a consumer society – these are the manifestations of the age of kitsch.¹⁸

As this quotation indicates, kitsch has been viewed in critical theory as the falsification of art – an imitation of genuine artistic culture perpetuated by industrialised consumer society. In 1939, Greenberg described kitsch as a formulaic simulacra of art, saying:

[K]itsch [uses] for raw materials the debased and academicised simulacra of genuine culture... kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas.¹⁹

Here, Greenberg was primarily reacting to academic art of the 19th century, which is often viewed as a borderline case of kitsch, due to its stylistically conservative nature and instant identifiability.²⁰ He argues that this kind of painting was kitsch as it was superficial, bypassing what is necessarily complex in art to appeal to the culturally-unedicated masses.²¹ Greenberg’s agenda was to advocate for avant-garde modernism, holding that this was the only true form of art left.²² He further states that: “[Kitsch] predigests art for the spectator and ... provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. [It] is synthetic art.”²³

Similar sentiments followed. Hermann Broch in 1955 described this “predigested” quality as a “closed system”, whereby the ultimate emotional and conceptual effects of a work of art are illustrated and immediately obtainable.²⁴ He states that “kitsch is not ‘bad art’; it forms its own closed system, which is lodged like a foreign body in the overall value system of art”.²⁵ Broch argues that this makes kitsch unethical, as rather than engaging in legitimate artistic investigation, it is concerned only with superficial appearances. He explains that “kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art”.²⁶

¹⁸ Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, front dustjacket.

¹⁹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 40.

²⁰ Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 60.

²¹ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 34-49.

²² *Ibid.*: 38.

²³ *Ibid.*: 44.

²⁴ Hermann Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 63.

More recently, in 1996, in line with Greenberg and Broch, philosopher Tomas Kulka offers an aesthetic evaluation of kitsch. He proposes that kitsch is a falsification of art as it does not function on an aesthetic level, but rather, an emotional one. Kulka explains that kitsch has interchangeable aesthetic qualities according to what is most conventional and identifiable at the time, and that the integral aspect through which kitsch functions is its “basic perceptual gestalt”, or key idea.²⁷ In the case of kitsch, this “basic perceptual gestalt” is the expression of a cliché, capable of provoking an immediate and intense emotional response of the familiar “stock emotion” variety, which is key to its mass appeal.²⁸ Kulka identifies this emotional response as sentimental in nature; an expression defined in negative terms as an “exaggerated and self-indulgent tenderness, sadness, or nostalgia”.²⁹

No Artistic Value

Until the 1990s many critics argued that kitsch does not possess any intrinsic value – artistically, aesthetically or materially – because it is regarded as a mass-produced consumer product that typically expresses clichéd ideas using existing, stylistic conventions. Kulka posits that kitsch does not by nature challenge or transform the ideas and associations related to its subject matter, and thus it holds no artistic worth. He states:

[Kitsch] does not sharpen, amplify, or transform the associations related to the depicted subject matter in any significant way. As opposed to real art, which involves an enhancement of certain experiences, kitsch tones them down.³⁰

In addition, critics argue that kitsch holds no aesthetic worth as it does not venture into stylistic innovation. Kulka holds that kitsch uses a schematic approach that typically involves conservative, “tried and tested” stylistic conventions, lacking in complexity, with a minimal concern for specific details, aiming for stereotype without concern for individual features or diversification.³¹ In this sense, he argues, kitsch differs radically from genuine art, and holds no artistic significance.

²⁷ Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 77.

²⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, “Sentimentality,” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sentimentality> (accessed 24 May 2018).

³⁰ Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 37.

The industrial fabrication of kitsch is deemed to hold no artistic authenticity – an aspect of artistic value that Walter Benjamin famously terms an artwork’s “aura”.³² According to Benjamin, objects made through a process of mechanisation and reproduction no longer carry this “cultic value”, which is established through the “unique existence” of an artwork that “constitutes the abstract idea of its genius”.^{33,34} As a cheaply made mass-produced imitation of artistic culture, kitsch is thus commonly considered as holding no intrinsic artistic value.

Deceptive

Foundational theory also deems kitsch as bad taste, maintaining that it can only be appreciated mistakenly by those lacking cultural knowledge. Greenberg claims that kitsch appeals to those of a low socio-economic status, who lack the time and means for education and exposure to the arts. He asserts that “kitsch [is] destined for those who [are] insensible to the values of genuine culture”.³⁵ In this sense, the lover of kitsch is considered to be of a low social class – a concept supported by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal 1979 essay *Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgement of Taste*. Bourdieu proposes that one’s taste is determined by class, in terms of education and socio-economic position.³⁶ In this sense, taste functions as a marker of ‘class’.³⁷ Dorfles make a similar claim, describing the lover of kitsch as culturally ignorant.³⁸ Dorfles describes the admirer of kitsch as one who does not appreciate the value of the complexity of genuine art; an individual:

[W]hose attitude... is hopelessly wrong ... who believes that art should only produce pleasant, sugary feelings; or even that art should form a kind of ‘condiment’... a decoration.³⁹

Kulka also sides with these views, stating, “consumers of kitsch do not buy kitsch because it is kitsch; they buy it because they take it for art”.⁴⁰ This suggests that kitsch is unethical and deceptive to the extent that it can fool those who take kitsch for true art.

³² Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2008), 7.

³³ *Ibid.*: 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 5.

³⁵ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 39.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1-7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 1-2.

³⁸ Dorfles describes that people who like kitsch do so “due to lack of education”. Dorfles, introduction to *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 16.

³⁹ Dorfles, introduction to *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 15.

⁴⁰ Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 44.

Kulka argues that the concept of kitsch is essentially an elitist concept. He states:

the term... denotes objects that have a widely popular appeal, yet despite this are considered bad by the art-educated elite. Anyone using this concept... implies a negative aesthetic judgement about works enjoyed by a great number of people. In this sense kitsch simply *is* an elitist concept.⁴¹

This aspect of kitsch theory is therefore essentially elitist in nature because it denigrates the lover of kitsch as ignorant.

My Experience of Conflict

Having learnt about these traditional negative perspectives of kitsch and its low cultural status, I understand the arguments set against it. However, my love of kitsch remains, and I find these traditional views limiting and contradictive to my contemporary positive experience. I experience genuine pleasure and positive, redeeming qualities in kitsch material culture that counter the view that kitsch can only be appreciated mistakenly by those lacking in cultural awareness. Kitsch objects in the specific collection I examine give me a visual pleasure and emotional comfort that in many ways seem particular to the nature of kitsch. My research proposes that the simple emotional sentiments that kitsch inspires offer a valuable and hopeful view, rather than an aspect of its deficiency. I challenge the traditional association of kitsch with low class, proposing that kitsch is a mode of popular taste. Kitsch is considered as cultural material of important psychological and sociological value, which thus holds a legitimate place in contemporary culture. I therefore maintain that there is more to add to the formal discussion on kitsch and I have found support for this perspective in contemporary re-evaluations of kitsch.

Contemporary Theoretical Re-evaluations of Kitsch

Contemporary cultural theory adds complexity to traditional discourse on kitsch, introducing fresh, positive views from a diverse range of perspectives. Recent, cross-disciplinary assessments reinterpret and redefine kitsch in ways that challenge the traditional assumptions of modernist and elitist conceptions of taste and class. Of particular relevance to my research are arguments made by sociologist Sam Binkley, design historian Judy Attfield, anthropologist Daniel Miller and cultural historian Celeste Olalquiaga.

Recent sociological and cultural theory argues that kitsch plays a positive social role and offers a valid aesthetic experience that can be appreciated outside class-specific

⁴¹ Ibid.: 12.

terms. Sam Binkley proposes that kitsch is a unique style which addresses the modern problem of “disembeddedness”, or the “undermining of personal horizons of social and cosmic security”.⁴² The “unique aesthetic” of kitsch, according to Binkley, works to “re-embed” its consumers through predictable imagery consisting of repetition and imitation.⁴³ This creates something akin to Broch’s “closed system”, which Binkley reinterprets in a positive light as a comforting, “existential cocoon” that protects the individual from an “undermined... sense of personal security... [caused by] an onslaught of consumer, career, lifestyle and existential choices”.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Binkley argues that the derivative nature of kitsch holds aesthetic value in expressing genuine sentiment. Binkley argues that in “fail[ing]... to realise the aesthetic objectives of high art” the forgery of kitsch “conveys the “all-too-human quality of folly”.⁴⁵ This translates into “a charming gesture of sincerity” that promotes goodwill and which offers an “anti-elitist availability”.⁴⁶ In considering kitsch as a unique aesthetic style, Binkley dislodges kitsch from traditional frameworks of hierarchy and class perpetuated by Greenberg and Bourdieu. Likewise, Attfield initiates a redefinition of kitsch, positioning it as a visual style and a valid category of popular taste in contemporary culture.⁴⁷ As she explains, “[kitsch is] an aesthetic manifestation of cultural significance within the context of popular taste... [that]... conveys a pleasurable, aesthetic genuine experience”.⁴⁸ Through positioning kitsch in a positive, more inclusive field of enquiry, Attfield breaks with the traditional, limiting views, which consider kitsch in relation to (and as an antithesis of) art.

Contemporary theory proposes that the concept of kitsch is elitist, and irrelevant to those who genuinely admire kitsch. In the article *Things That Bright Up the Place*, instead of examining kitsch from the traditional perspective of taste, Miller considers it as a “powerful aesthetic form” in relation to the “experience of those who possess, and live through it”.⁴⁹ He argues that to some cultural groups, kitsch represents entirely other meanings associated with genuine feelings and sentiments.⁵⁰ Miller focusses on the often denigrated sentimental qualities of kitsch, to examine kitsch as a material culture “saturated with humanity”, and holds that in relation to particular cultural groups,

⁴² Sam Binkley, “Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy,” *Journal of Material Culture* 5, no.2 (2000): 131, doi: 10.1177/135918350000500201.

⁴³ Binkley, “Kitsch as a Repetitive System,” 133-135.

⁴⁴ Ibid.: 141-149.

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 141.

⁴⁶ Ibid.: 140-141.

⁴⁷ Judy Attfield, “Redefining Kitsch: The Politics of Design.” *Home Cultures* 3, no. 3 (2006): 203, doi: 10.2752/174063106779090758.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 206-207.

⁴⁹ Daniel Miller, “Things that Bright Up the Place,” *Home Cultures* 3, no. 3 (2006): 235.

⁵⁰ Judy Attfield on Daniel Miller’s argument. Attfield, “Redefining Kitsch,” 210.

to think in terms of kitsch is to condescend.⁵¹ This view adds complexity to the traditional denigration of individuals who admire kitsch as being ignorant, and supports the view that kitsch promotes a restorative effect.

Furthermore, these contemporary commentators view the taste for sentiment in a positive light, as playing a positive social role by offering a sense of predictability, familiarity and hope. Binkley describes the sentimental nature of kitsch as key to its imitative nature, expressing “a joy in feeling itself”.⁵² He argues that kitsch works to “replenish stocks of ontological security” by appealing to “sentimental affirmation over existential probing”.⁵³ He proposes that by “appeal[ing] to sentiment, kitsch aims to re-embed its consumers on the ‘deepest’ personal level”.⁵⁴ Contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton’s writing relates to this argument. He holds that art which portrays pretty, idyllic and sweet imagery (which might be termed kitsch) – subject matter often deemed negatively as ‘sentimental’ – can play an important function: by offering a positive and legitimate hopeful view, even if understood as a partial perspective.⁵⁵

Recent discourse also proposes that distinctions between high and low culture can be collapsed through reinterpreting kitsch via the visual arts. In the chapter *Holy Kitschen*, Olalquiaga defines kitsch as consisting of three categories, where in the “third-degree”, kitsch can be reinterpreted through art and cultural practices, such as construction of the Catholic Latino *altaro*, or home altar, to create new aesthetic experiences that transcend the objects, in a way that “stands in direct opposition to the impersonal politics of high and mass culture”.⁵⁶ She argues that this Postmodern re-evaluation creates a new, hybrid product, which gains a new social place that “collapses the distinction between the avant-garde and kitsch – and by extension, between high and popular art”.⁵⁷ According to Olalquiaga, this is a positive sign of inclusion: “a sign of opening to and enjoyment of all that traditional culture worked so hard to leave out”.⁵⁸ Olalquiaga’s argument thus supports my research aims to create artwork that re-assesses kitsch by conveying my personal, positive experience.

⁵¹ Miller describes that, “sentimentality is just as denigrated in formal ... aesthetic criteria as is kitsch, and yet it directly addresses the capacity of kitsch to create a sense of warmth, empathy, and comfort... by bypassing immediate relationships and addressing the larger sense of humanity that makes us cry or laugh”. Miller, “Things that Bright Up the Place,” 237-247.

⁵² Binkley, “Kitsch as a Repetitive System,” 142.

⁵³ *Ibid.*: 133-135.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 135

⁵⁵ Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon, 2013), 22.

⁵⁶ Celeste Olalquiaga, “Holy Kitschen,” in *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 39.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 46-50.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 55.

Affect theory is also relevant to my research, as it is involved in the re-assessment of the value of things that provoke an emotional response, although for the purposes of this paper I do not include analysis of this concept in detail. A recent study in this field proposes that perception involves an immediate emotional response, drawing from past experience.⁵⁹ Affect theory also involves an assessment of how the visual arts might convey or provoke emotional response. Art which primarily exists to produce affect has been traditionally criticised by theorists such as Greenberg as being kitsch; however, affect theory offers the view that all perception involves an immediate emotional response, and thus kitsch is not particular or negative in this way. Susan Best's book, *Visualising Feeling*, proposes that all art is "subjective and concerned with feeling".⁶⁰ This challenges the view that the affective dimension of kitsch is an aspect that denigrates it, as it also applies to art.

Collecting

Theories on the practice of collecting support my claim that kitsch offers psychological and sociological value. The writing of Susan Stewart, Jean Baudrillard, Peter Schwenger, Walter Benjamin and Alain de Botton, among others, proposes that collecting and displaying objects in the home is a means to create a controlled interior world that provides respite from the challenges and unpredictability of the outside world.⁶¹ As kitsch objects promote a comforting sense of "embeddedness" which brackets "uncertainties, existential questions" with "reassuring traditions and habits of thought" – a notion asserted by Binkley – the collecting of kitsch thus amplifies this reassuring effect.⁶²

Discourse on collecting proposes that when objects become part of a collection, they are, as Baudrillard described in 1968, "divested of their function", where their value shifts from utility to symbolic and aesthetic value.⁶³ Objects which hold little monetary worth, or cultural and artistic significance – including kitsch items – can thus take on

⁵⁹ According to Barrett and Mosche Barr, "the brain's ability to see in the present incorporates a representation of the affective impact of those visual sensations in the past", meaning one's perception of the world is coloured by emotional associations established prior to the present moment. L. F. Barrett and Mosche Bar, "See it with Feeling: Affective Predictions during Object Perception", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 346, no. 1521 (2009): 1325-1334.

⁶⁰ Susan Best, *Visualising Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 1.

⁶¹ Patrik Mauries writes that collectors are driven by a "unique passion, that of protecting themselves against the abstract nature of the collective experience". Patrick Mauries, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 134.

⁶² Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System," 135.

⁶³ Baudrillard, Jean. "The System of Collecting," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. Roger Cardinal and John Elsner (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 7.

great significance in a collection, in their ability to signify memory and personal significance. As Olalquiaga explains:

[n]o matter how common, an object can always be rescued from its apparent banality by the investment in it of personal meaning, that ineffable “sentimental value” which can beat the most priceless items.⁶⁴

Olalquiaga argues that within the context of a collection, objects thus become unique in their historical association with a person.⁶⁵ In this sense, although characterised as lacking in artistic authenticity, or Benjamin’s *aura*, mass-produced items can still hold value in being particular in relation to a person.

Contemporary perspectives on collecting also hold that it is a creative enterprise, where participants are not passive consumers, but active producers of meaning.⁶⁶ This challenges the elitist view, perpetuated by Greenberg and Bourdieu, that those who collect kitsch do so without critical judgement. Contemporary consumers are considered to engage with popular culture with “intrinsic creativity and criticality” to “instil new meanings in the objects they acquire”.⁶⁷ The selection and curation of objects within the domestic sphere, is ultimately considered a theatrical mode of “self-fashioning”, where the home becomes a site for the “enactment of the self”.^{68,69} Collections thus offer psychological benefits by validating identity, through reflecting ideas, relationships, memories and aspirations significant to the collector.

Theory on collecting, along with contemporary re-assessments of kitsch from a diverse range of perspectives, thus supports the view that kitsch holds redeeming qualities of aesthetic and psycho-sociological value. Contemporary kitsch theory promotes the notion that, through artistic practice, kitsch can be re-evaluated and re-cast to hold new meanings that collapse distinctions between high and low art – a view in accord with the premise of this project.

⁶⁴ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 16-17.

⁶⁶ Annemarie Money describes that “in everyday domestic life... individuals become producers of meaning rather than simply producers of goods”. Annemarie Money, “Material Culture and the Living Room: The Appropriation and Use of Goods in Everyday Life,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7, no. 3 (2007): 358.

⁶⁷ Binkley, “Kitsch as a Repetitive System,” 134.

⁶⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham; London;: Duke University Press, 1993), 157.

⁶⁹ Rachel Hurdley, “Dismantling Mantelpieces: Narrating Identities and Materialising Culture in the Home,” *Sociology* 40, no. 4 (2006): 718.

Having examined positive re-evaluations of kitsch in contemporary discourse, I now consider how kitsch has been engaged in the visual arts, to contextualise and define the nature of my research.

Responses to Kitsch in Contemporary Art

Contemporary artists have explored mass culture and kitsch since the evolution of the Pop movement in the 1950s, reflecting a contemporary interest in popular culture and the vernacular. Artists working in the Postmodern and contemporary field challenge modernist views on taste and related associations of class distinction, provocatively embracing new fields of inquiry, expressing a range of responses to mass culture and kitsch involving irony, humour, fascination and affection.

Perhaps the most well-known contemporary artist working with kitsch imagery is Jeff Koons. Koons engages with imagery from American popular culture to deal with themes of desire, sexuality, banality and transgression. By inflating the trivial to the scale and material status of high art, his wilful provocation challenges the viewer to consider whether the work is an endorsement or ironic parody of kitsch aesthetics, provoking a diversity of responses in critical discourse.⁷⁰

The ambiguity of Koons' work is created, in part, through monumental scale and by the perfect "objective" rendering of his paintings and sculptures, which the artist outsources to expert craftspeople.^{71,72} The arguable lack of warmth or personal fondness expressed in the portrayal of his subject matter creates an effect of aesthetic ambivalence. For example, in the series *Celebration*, Koons represents a range of

⁷⁰ The critical reception of Koons's work is highly divergent. Some sources interpret Koons's work as a sincere attempt to promote a sense of hope to the middle classes by "celebrat[ing]... sexuality... family values... childhood... love [and] happiness". Francesco Bonami, "Koons 'R' Us," in *Jeff Koons* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2008), 10. As curator Francesco Bonami writes, Koons "[t]rusts the power of art to communicate with everyone and carry on a message of hope". He continues, "...his attitude is soaked with sincerity... he believes in the power of the middle class to achieve bliss on earth". Ibid.: 8-15. Other sources describe Koons's work as highly ambiguous. For example, curator John Caldwell describes Koons's work as "so difficult to believe. One can't help but think that his objects must be in the service of a parody or critique, and yet nothing, either in the works themselves or in Koons's published statements, gives the slightest reassurance they are." John Caldwell, "Jeff Koons: The Way We Live Now," in *Jeff Koons*, ed. Fronia W. Simpson (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 17. Likewise, gallery director John R. Lane describes how, "[p]ossessing an uncanny ability to elicit controversy, Koons's art promotes such questions as: 'Are these works profound or superficial?; Do they merit thoughtful consideration or can they be dismissed with a fast and easy response?; Are they avant garde?; Kitsch?'" John R. Lane, "Director's Foreword" in Ibid.: 7.

⁷¹ Koons terms his process as "objective". Anthony Haden-Guest, "Interview: Jeff Koons," in *Jeff Koons* ed. Angelica Muthesius (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1992), 15.

⁷² Koons commissions expert craftspeople. Tate Gallery, "Jeff Koons: Banality, Decadence and Easyfun," <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/jeff-koons-2368/jeff-koons-banality-decadence-and-easyfun> (accessed 15 October 2018).

balloon animals at grand scale in polished stainless steel (fig. 7). The representation of these familiar childhood playthings evokes at one level a sense of nostalgia, fun and desire, and also a sense of wonder at the scale and reflective perfection of the surfaces. Their monumentality and polished, hard metal finish, however, can also make the subject matter seem unapproachable, cold and imposing, creating a sense of unease.⁷³



Fig. 7. Jeff Koons, *Balloon Swan, Balloon Monkey, Balloon Rabbit* (2005-10, installation view)

Koons' use of provocation also suggests an ironic view of kitsch. In the series *Banalities*, Koons appropriates stylistic conventions associated with Baroque fine porcelain and religious iconography to represent imagery of popular American icons. These include singer Michael Jackson with his pet chimpanzee Bubbles (fig. 5), and a Cabbage Patch Doll dressed as a teddy bear (fig. 8). The works create an aesthetically jarring, wilfully ambiguous or ambivalent effect, leaving us unclear as to whether he expresses a genuine affection for the subjects, or an ironic transgression of 'high art' values.



Fig. 8. Jeff Koons, *Amore* (1988)

⁷³ John Caldwell describes how “the transformation into stainless steel and art has rendered these objects unapproachable”. He continues, “when cast in stainless steel... [these objects are] cold and tactilely uninviting”. John Caldwell, “Jeff Koons: The Way We Live Now,” 12.

Other artists have incorporated imagery from kitsch and popular culture to examine aspects of the material culture of their day, as well as to convey their personal connection to objects. These include Audrey Flack, Ricky Swallow and Lucy Culliton.

Drawing from Dutch still life traditions, Flack investigates the power of objects to symbolise greater meaning associated with spirituality and universal themes of life and death, as well as autobiography, in her grand-scale colourful paintings (figs. 39,80).⁷⁴ In Chapters Two and Three I analyse Flack's portrayal of the mobile appearance of shine, and her rendering of the dazzling effect of reflective surfaces, which lends glamour to objects of low aesthetic status. Likewise, Swallow investigates the symbolic power of objects to convey universal themes of time, life and death, investigating technology and artefacts from 1980s and '90s popular culture (figs. 60,75). His handmade woodcarvings offer a counterpoint to Koons' cool, impersonal approach to portraying imagery of mass culture. In Chapter Two, I analyse how the artist's time-laden, devotional approach to craft expresses a fondness and warmth toward the objects he portrays, and in Chapter Three, how his observation of the particularities of mass-produced objects portrays them as unique in their association with the artist.



Figure 9. Lucy Culliton, *Any Article Knitted with Lace or Ribbon* (2006)
Figure 10. Lucy Culliton, *Knitted Dolls (Crowd Scene)* (2007)

Culliton depicts items from country Australian culture that might be termed kitsch, including handmade toys from country shows, such as dolls with crochet dresses and knitted teddy bears (figs. 9-10). The artist engages with such objects without irony, exploring formal and aesthetic qualities with genuine interest and affection. As gallerist Jan Murphy describes, Culliton is concerned with “extract[ing] the objective truth of her

⁷⁴ Ann Sutherland Harris, “A Personal View,” in *Audrey Flack: On Painting*, ed. Margaret L. Kaplan (New York: Harry N. Abrams), 10-13.

chosen forms with accuracy and precision”.⁷⁵ In the above figure, Culliton focusses on examining formal aspects such as the lacy folds of the dolls’ skirts, or the differences in colour and shape of the knitted toys, grouping like-objects together to explore formal variation. In her detailed observation she depicts the items as worthy of serious contemplation. Like Culliton, I investigate my family’s collection to examine its aesthetic characteristics, showing genuine fondness for particular kitsch objects.

Other contemporary artists have focussed on the immersive, strange and imaginative potential of the kitsch world, offering responses that engage with aspects of cuteness, wonder, humour, excess and a fascination that entails both attraction and repulsion. Artists who explore these perspectives include Cassie Marie Edwards, Debra Broz, and Pip and Pop.



Fig. 11. Cassie Marie Edwards, *Little Stinker* (2014)
Fig. 12. Debra Broz, *Polycephelus (Two-headed Lamb)* (2008)

Edwards’ work focusses on rendering the material and surface qualities of anthropomorphised ornamental animals such as rabbits, squirrels and horses, to consider their particular and imaginative features (fig. 11). In Chapter Four, I address the artist’s attraction to their “personalities” and how this reflects the appeal of collecting kitsch objects such as these.⁷⁶ Broz creates hybrid sculptures out of china animal figurines found in thrift stores to subvert kitsch idealisations (fig. 12).⁷⁷ In Chapter Four I analyse how the artist’s deconstruction of kitsch imagery highlights its whimsicality; however, the implications and objectives of Broz’s work differ from my

⁷⁵ Jan Murphy Gallery, “Lucy Culliton,” <http://www.janmurphygallery.com.au/artist/lucy-culliton/> (accessed 10 August 2018).

⁷⁶ “All Figured Out: Say Hello to Cassie Marie Edwards’s Sweet Porcelain Portraits,” *Frankie* no 67, (September/October 2015), 77.

⁷⁷ Houston Centre for Contemporary Craft, “Artist and Ceramic Restorer Debra Broz on Gender, Craft Traditions & her own Art Practice,” <https://www.crafthouston.org/2016/03/artist-and-ceramic-restorer-debra-broz-on-gender-craft-traditions-her-own-art-practice/> (accessed 16 June 2017).

own. Rather than subverting the idealisation of kitsch, I celebrate this characteristic for its depiction of a simple, sweet and hopeful worldview.

Pip and Pop's ephemeral miniature worlds draw from stories of paradise and imaginary lands. Made of sugar and hand-crafted forms, they evoke a realm that is sweet both materially and conceptually in a style that could be described as a kind of Rococo-Pop fusion (figs. 13,14,88,89). The intensity of this sugary world, however, implies undertones of excess.⁷⁸ The artist describes her work as holding an "empty promise", where the sugar is "something that is so appealing and sweet but completely devoid of nutrition or lasting satisfaction".⁷⁹ This reflects a sense of kitsch as a superficial realm, where bright, happy sentiments lack deeper meaning or genuine feeling. In contrast, I engage with an experience of kitsch loaded with personal significance and emotional resonance, as rather than empty vessels, the objects I depict hold great emotional significance. In Chapter Three, I analyse Pip and Pop's work further, considering how a cute aesthetic contributes to the evocation of an innocent fantasy world.



Fig.13. Pip and Pop, *Journey in a Dream (Day)*, (2015, installation view at Shinsegae Gallery, Busan, Korea)

⁷⁸ Sarah Bond, "Pathways and Peepholes: The World of Pip and Pop," in *2012 Kuandi Biennale: Artist in Wonderland*, ed. Tehi Chu (Taipei: Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei National University of the Arts, 2012), 80. http://media.wix.com/ugd/5e445c_ee0f75380b3b4052a7a2376b16332173.pdf (accessed 7 December 2016).

⁷⁹ Hot 'N' Gold Magazine, "Interview: Pip and Pop," <http://www.hotgoldmag.com/pip-and-pop> (accessed 21 September 2017).



Fig. 14. Pip and Pop, *Journey in a Dream (Day)*, (2015, installation view at Shinsegae Gallery, Busan, Korea)

Having examined how kitsch has been variously re-cast in contemporary literature and visual arts, I will now analyse the specific characteristics of my family collection as representing positive and redeeming attributes. I investigate and trial ways to portray these qualities via methodologies of painting and display to show my regard for this aspect of material culture, extending upon the existing re-assessments of kitsch in the visual arts.

Positive and Redeeming Qualities

Reflecting on the family collection, I investigate the optical attraction and sensual pleasure of kitsch generated by a heightened use of the material and surface qualities of shine and iridescence. I also examine a range of redeeming aspects of kitsch. These include: subject matter that promotes hope and joy; an affirming message of self-acceptance and appealing sincerity promoted through the failure of kitsch to convincingly imitate stylistic conventions of fine art; and the sentimental value particular objects hold.

Some of these qualities are particular, or common, to kitsch, including an abundant use of shine, which generates a sense of faux luxury via cheap manufacturing methods that simulate pearlescence, gems and gold. Other attributes pertain more generally to objects, including an invested sentimental value, and depiction of romantic subject matter. Combined, these contribute to the qualities I associate with my experience of the family collection.

Pleasurable Aesthetic Experience

I find particular visual pleasure in the aesthetic qualities of kitsch in its shine, sparkle, and iridescence. The popular aesthetic of kitsch adopts these features in excess, often in combination, to create a heightened sensory experience.

Beholding iridescent surface qualities, as evident in the swan figurines pictured in Figure 15, provokes a kind of wonder and fascination. I find the morphing iridescence that shifts over these surfaces, and the glints of painted gold optically exciting and mesmerising, and a fascinating challenge to paint. Iridescence has an elusive, mysterious quality; it cannot be fathomed at a glance, it must be sought out by shifting one's perspective or through turning an object over in one's hands.



Fig. 15. Iridescent surface qualities

The shine and shimmer of these objects creates an effect of glamour and affordable faux luxury. The term *glamour* is especially apt. Defined as “an exciting and often illusory and romantic attractiveness”, glamour is linked to the synonyms “elegant” and “distinguished”.^{80,81} Glamour is not necessarily attached to true finery, but rather, is a subjective attribution of value or effect that evokes associations of sophistication. The term also relates to the notion of enchantment and magic.⁸² This idea perfectly suits the agenda of kitsch, which is to conjure a sense of luxurious appeal by imitating the appearance of fine quality items and expensive materials. Celeste Olalquiaga explains that the shiny material qualities of kitsch objects create a “symbolic richness” whereby “economic worth is... conveyed by glitter and shine, mirrors and glass, a profusion of

⁸⁰ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Glamour,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glamour> (accessed 10 October 2016).

⁸¹ Cambridge Dictionary, “Glamorous,” <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/glamorous> (accessed 10 October 2016).

⁸² Oxford English Dictionary, “Glamour,” (accessed 10 October 2016).

gold and silvery objects, and sheer abundance”.⁸³ The effect of glamour contributes to the allure of kitsch as an affordable experience of luxury.

During my fieldwork research, I visited palatial sites in Europe in order to experience at firsthand the origins of the opulent interior, an experience that the collector, Sue, aims to create using shimmering contemporary kitsch items that suggest wealth and sophistication. In particular, my experience of the Neo-Rococo Linderhof Palace in Bavaria, commissioned by King Ludwig II of Bavaria in 1867, seemed to relate to the interior decoration of my family home.⁸⁴ In the palace, the whole interior, including the furniture and fittings, seemed connected in a cohesive and opulent aesthetic effect, involving elaborate, gold, three-dimensional scrollwork decoration (figs. 146,147). This cohesive effect was invented in the Baroque and Rococo eras, and is termed the *bel composto* or beautiful whole, whereby multiple artistic forms combine to create a unified aesthetic experience.⁸⁵ This was meant to dazzle the viewer.⁸⁶ My family’s collection is quite eclectic, rather than unified; however, it does create an elaborate, dazzling, and immersive experience of faux opulence on a domestic scale, in its own kitsch way. Through the sheer abundance of items displayed from floor to ceiling, the collection creates a cohesive experience of kitsch eclecticism, one that radiates faux luxury and iridescent splendour.

Restorative Subject Matter

My family’s collection includes objects such as a cheerful girl feeding ducks (fig. 16), a smiling cat in a basket (fig. 17) and two waltzing lovers in period costume (fig. 18). These all engage with sweet, fanciful subject matter and promote a sense of optimism and the finding of comfort in simple pleasures. This kind of idyllic imagery is deemed troubling by many critics as promoting sentimental clichés, which stimulate an “insufficient engagement with complexity” and a kind of “misplaced innocence”.⁸⁷ Sweet, “pretty imagery”, however, can also offer an uncomplicated, hopeful view of the world. Contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton describes a popular category of art as the “cheerful, pleasant and pretty kind: meadows in spring... pastoral landscapes, smiling children”.⁸⁸ He goes on to argue that this type of imagery gives expression for a longing for harmony and sweetness. He states:

⁸³ Olalquiaga, “Holy Kitschen,” 39.

⁸⁴ Irmgard Killing, ed., *Linderhof Palace: Official Guide* (Munich: Bayerische Verwaltung der staatlichen Schlösser, Gärten und Seen, 2006), 7.

⁸⁵ Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art and Ideas: Baroque and Rococo* (London: Phaidon, 2012), 9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: 12.

⁸⁷ De Botton and Armstrong, *Art as Therapy*, 13-20.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: 13.

[I]t's a loss if we condemn all... that is gracious and sweet as sentimental and in denial... we should be able to enjoy an ideal image without regarding it as a false picture of how things usually are. A beautiful, though partial, vision can be all the more precious to us because we are so aware of how rarely life satisfies our desires.⁸⁹

In this sense, from a psychological perspective, the idyllic, sweetened imagery of kitsch fulfils a desire for a simpler, happier world, offering comfort and a sense of hope.



Figs. 16,17,18. (left to right) The sweet, the cute, the idyllic

The collection also includes the humorous and surprising. A wide array of Avon perfume bottles depict miniature anthropomorphised animals: a mouse dressed in a wedding gown featuring a real lace veil (fig. 19), and a terrier with a bandaged head from a tooth-ache (fig. 21). Two formally attired plastic swan figurines (fig. 20) function as pens: their heads pull off to reveal biros, perhaps for use at a wedding. Such absurd and whimsical imagery brings a light-hearted, comedic optimism to the domestic realm.



Figs. 19,20,21. (left to right) Humour, surprise, whimsicality

⁸⁹ Ibid.: 20.

Given that many objects in the collection originate from the 1950s, these objects reflect a reaction to Modernism. Their aesthetic sits outside modernist ideas of taste and reflects a desire for simple, positive sentiments within a domestic context. According to art historian Bevis Hillier, an aspect of the cultural spirit of the '50s was one of whimsy, following the austerity of the post-war period.⁹⁰ The term whimsy is defined as “[p]layfully quaint or fanciful, especially in an appealing and amusing way”.⁹¹ The silly, funny, whimsical nature of such collections as the Avon bottles, which during this era promoted an uplifting, hopeful outlook, contributes to the sweetened world that kitsch perpetuates in this collection.

Aspirational Qualities

Another redeeming and endearing aspect of kitsch involves the ‘quality’ of failure to achieve the sophistication and convincing mimicry to which kitsch artefacts often aspire. As well as evoking a sense of faux luxury via shine and reflection, many objects in the collection draw from stylistic conventions of Baroque and Rococo porcelainware. Their use of porcelain as a material conjures a sense of cultural sophistication, drawing from the prestige that this material traditionally carries. Introduced to Europe in the 1600s, porcelain was a material which originally held great value and cultural status. Once termed “white gold”, it carries a history of high cultural status and material value in the West – a value that was amplified in fine works of art in the Baroque and Rococo eras.⁹²

For example, the object shown in Figure 22 – a kind of clock/barometer – is a fused conglomeration of liquid and swan forms reminiscent of Baroque porcelain sculpture. This fusing of forms is described by art historian Heinrich Wölfflin as a Baroque, “painterly” quality that creates an effect of movement through dissolving definitions between the contours and boundaries of forms.⁹³ An example of this effect in an authentic Baroque ornament is *Venus and Adonis* (fig. 23). The clock, in its glitzy iridescence, cute-style representation (and the fact that it does not indicate time but rather strangely shows levels of humidity), reveals its kitsch character and fails at true opulence. Rather than seeming insincere, however, the failed attempt of this object to achieve the grandeur and sophistication of the original can be interpreted as aspirational and endearing.

⁹⁰ Bevis Hillier, *Austerity Binge: The Decorative Arts of the Forties and Fifties* (London: Studio Vista, 1975), 128.

⁹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, “Whimsical,” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/whimsical> (accessed 9 December 2016).

⁹² Edmund du Waal, *The White Road: A Journey into Obsession* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2016), 8.

⁹³ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1964), 31.



Fig. 22. (left) Imitation Baroque and Rococo stylistic conventions
Fig. 23. (right) Vincennes Porcelain Factory, *Venus and Adonis* (1750-55)

This aligns with Sam Binkley’s argument, cited earlier, that “kitsch turns failure into cute”.⁹⁴ Binkley explains that in falling well short of the grandeur that kitsch aims for, the failure of its forgery transforms into a sincere quality, evoking simple emotion. He states, “[k]itsch’s copy is not simply a short cut to an identical aesthetic experience... that fails to convince... it is a transvaluation of insincerity into sincerity... and thus of forgery into an all too sincere gesture of human goodwill”.⁹⁵ In a paradoxical way, kitsch promotes an affirming message that endorses human nature by presenting human failure as an endearing quality.⁹⁶

Sentimental Value

Finally, as a collection belonging to my family – one that formed the environment of my upbringing – it is evident that kitsch objects can take on significant personal meaning that makes them comforting and emotionally valuable. This ‘sentimental value’ is not at all exclusive to kitsch, but is an aspect of my experience of the collection, which influences the pleasure and significance that these objects hold for me. This project speculates on the significance the collection holds for the collectors, Mike and Sue, as well as addressing the personal value and meaning it holds for me.

Although the specific personal meaning or memory associated with each piece is ultimately private to the collector, something of their significance is apparent in the

⁹⁴ Binkley, “Kitsch as a Repetitive System,” 140.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*: 140.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: 140.

choice of subject and in how the objects are curated. The collection comprises a number of themes or categories, including swans, birds, flowers, and imagery of nature in general, which reflect, amongst other things, the collectors' love of nature. Many ornaments portray infantilised animals, often in pairs or groups, which allude to the idea of family and parenthood. The imagery represented in the collection also invokes a romanticised fantasy world of another time and place, transforming the suburban Australian middle-class interior into a space that encompasses references to other countries and eras. Ornaments depict Eurocentric imagery, which carries associations of cultural sophistication: for example, European animals and figures dressed in fancy period costume. In some ways these objects allude to the collector's European cultural heritage.

Objects are displayed in groupings according to categories or to imply narrative, which further reveals the significance of the objects. The display shown in Figure 24 reflects the collector, Sue's, fascination with the motif of the swan, a subject I investigate in *Heirloom* (Chapter One). Presented together on a large doily, the swans take the form of salt and pepper shakers, jugs and vases, of varying sizes, colours, materials and representational styles. Other groupings suggest imagined relationships or narrative between the objects. The grouping of swans shown in Figure 25 implies a family relationship. The shepherdess appears to be herding swans rather than sheep in Figure 26. Couples or sets of pairs feature in the collection. Displayed together they allude to sibling or romantic relationships (figs. 27 and 28). This reflects the collectors' valuing of family, and a joy in imaginatively interpreting the objects. The collection also features actual or adopted souvenirs, intermixed to create a collage that encompasses both memory and fantasy (figs. 29 and 30).



Fig. 24. Categorisation (the swan)



Figs. 25,26. Familial relationships, suggested narratives



Figs. 27,28. Pairs, sibling or romantic relationships



Figs. 29,30. Souvenirs signifying memory and validating aspirations of future travel

* * *

In the three chapters that follow, I discuss the chronological development of my practice-led research as a painter. I will often revisit the authors and artists cited above, discussing how they have contributed to my approach in the studio in specific ways, as I engage in methods to portray my fascination with the theme of kitsch as an experience of cultural collision.

Chapter Two: *Driven by Fascination*

Introduction

This chapter outlines the early stages of my studio-based research and how I began to investigate, via the technical and formal aspects of the painting process, the nature of the sense of conflict between my love of my family's kitsch collection and my engagement as a practitioner of fine art, and how I might represent it visually. Each of the three parts of this chapter describes the making of a particular work: *Heirloom*, *Lustrefish* and *Nautical Objects*. I focus on the spatial and installation aspects of all three works in Part Three.

In this chapter, I begin to explore ways to address the multiple aspects of fascination that drive this project. This includes the attraction these objects hold for my family as collectors, the affection I have for the objects, and the sense of collision I feel when confronted by the low regard in which they might be more generally held. I investigate a range of ways to convey the personal value the objects signify for the collectors, Sue and Mike, as well as the aesthetic and personal worth the collection represents for me. In doing so, I seek ways to convey more broadly, the psycho-sociological value that kitsch objects can hold. Additionally, I start to examine the fascination I feel for the technical challenges of portraying them in paint.

I connect the development of these early works with considering the practice of collecting informed by the writing of Susan Stewart, Alain de Botton, Walter Benjamin and Celeste Olalquiaga, to explore how kitsch ornaments take on personal value. I will discuss how this involves both a thematic and a formal interest in these objects. In *Heirloom* I expand on a specific example – that of the swan ornament – and in *Nautical Objects* I demonstrate how collecting is a process of exploring and curating one's personal interests and constructing meaning via categorisation.

I begin to analyse the material and surface qualities of the objects in this collection and propose how these contribute to their aesthetic allure. Methods are developed to represent shiny and iridescent porcelain, informed by the writings of Jonathan Miller and Ernst Gombrich. I examine the optically elusive nature of these material qualities and the fascinations they hold both for the collector and for the painter. In particular, I consider how depicting the mobile qualities of shine and the perceptual ambiguity of iridescence in paint might highlight the kinds of pleasures or fascination involved in collecting objects with these qualities. I situate my work within the context of contemporary painting and sculpture that explores ideas of desire and ambiguity

associated with these optical experiences. In particular, I consider the work of Audrey Flack, Michael Borremans, Will Cotton and Anish Kapoor.

Also investigated are ways of conveying my aesthetic appreciation of these objects. I reflect on the historical associations of wealth connected with the portrayal of shiny ornaments, particularly in relation to Northern Baroque still life painting. In my practice, I reference this genre as a means of challenging the low aesthetic status of the kitsch ornaments I represent, to convey my regard for them. I explore how my meticulous painting approach renders them in a level of fine detail that demands a sustained level of attention from the painter, which is then reciprocated by the viewer.

In this early research, I begin to investigate methods to display my paintings as a three-dimensional presentation. My aim is to re-present the objects, via painting, to provide a challenging and personalised perspective of them, by creating an experience that parallels how we might view objects in a domestic setting in reality. I consider how modes of perspective create an illusion of depth and a sense of close proximity to the depicted subject matter, to elicit a sense of its material presence. I also explore grouping paintings to suggest their domestic curation. I draw from conventions of theatre set design, to encourage the viewer to suspend disbelief, referring to Norman Bryson's writing on how painting can transform a space into a kind of theatre, and my approach is defined as distinct from installation art.

Heirloom (2012)

My first challenge was deciding where to start, given the vast quantity and variety of objects to choose from. What objects should I select? How might I begin to show the personal and aesthetic value I find in the collection?

I began by investigating the porcelain swan ornaments that my mother Sue collects. I chose them because they seem representative of the collection; in their variety, the swans comprise of over 50 individual pieces, and influence the character of the collection as a whole. They come in many forms, including vases, tiny figurines, salt and pepper shakers, wall-mounted flying forms, and large opalescent ornaments embedded with clocks (figs. 31,32).



Figs. 31,32. A range of swan ornaments

I considered what might attract someone to the motif of the swan. Swans have a number of symbolic associations, including grace, beauty, fidelity and love.⁹⁷ Historically, in Western culture they have been associated with ideas of royalty and prestige, and featured in European heraldry and royal insignias. The swan even holds protected status in Britain, as an animal belonging to the crown.⁹⁸ Swans are popular in stories and folklore, often carrying mystic or magical properties. One of the most famous tales featuring this animal is *The Ugly Duckling* by Hans Christian Anderson: a tale of transformation in which a grey cygnet is chided for being different and unappealing, only to transform into a creature of beauty and sophistication.⁹⁹ The

⁹⁷ Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and its Symbols* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), 304.

⁹⁸ Smithsonian Magazine, "The Fascinating, Regal History behind Britain's Swans," <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fascinating-history-british-thrones-swans-180964249/> (accessed 04 February 2018).

⁹⁹ The Hans Christian Anderson Centre, "The Ugly Duckling," http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheUglyDuckling_e.html (accessed 5 May 2018).

shape of the swan corresponds to the 'serpentine line', described by British artist William Hogarth in 1753 as "the line of beauty".¹⁰⁰ These cultural, metaphoric and aesthetic associations connected to the swan colour the atmosphere of the collection with themes of love, beauty and cultural sophistication.

According to the collector, Sue, the swan represents a sense of calm. After moving to a small coastal town for a quieter pace, the first object Sue bought was a swan ornament – a motif which represented the serenity she sought in this new place. By collecting these ornaments to display in her home, she created a sanctuary. The object pictured in Figure 33 reflects a loving and serene relationship between two swans. This sentimental imagery promotes positive, restorative feelings in the collector.



Fig. 33. Vase in the form of embracing swans

Alain de Botton argues that the decoration of our homes helps connect us to desirable states of mind. He states that:

We depend on our surroundings... to embody the moods and ideas we respect and to then remind us of them...[w]e arrange around us material forms which communicate to us what we need, and are at constant risk of forgetting we need – within.¹⁰¹

Through collecting and displaying swan figurines, Sue has created an interior environment that promotes the desired feeling of calm.

¹⁰⁰ Princeton University Art Museum, "The Line of Beauty: Reconfiguring the Serpentine Line from Drawing into Photography," <http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/object-package/line-beauty-refiguring-serpentine-line-drawing-photography/43017> (accessed 8 June 2018).

¹⁰¹ Alain de Botton, "The Idea of Home," *Independent*, 7 June 2008. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/alain-de-botton-the-idea-of-home-841643.html> (accessed 25 August 2018).

I represented a specific category from the collection to demonstrate the nature of collecting, and to convey the idea that the objects belonged to and were valued by someone. Cultural theorist Susan Stewart explains that the process of collecting involves categorisation. She states that “[t]he collection is not constructed by its elements; rather, it comes to exist by means of its principle of organisation”.¹⁰² Stewart also holds that categorisation can be motivated by a formal interest in objects: “[B]ecause of a collection’s seriality... aesthetic value replaces use value.”¹⁰³ In this sense, when objects become part of a collection and their use value becomes secondary to decorative function, their formal qualities take on primary importance. Collecting can thus be motivated by an interest in discovering the variety of forms a particular kind of object can take. Furthermore, aspects that differentiate objects within a category can become desirable to the collector as they broaden the possibilities for expanding a collection.

I reflected on the collection as a sampling of variations of the swan figurine, where a range of makes and styles are represented. Because of their mass-produced nature, kitsch items intrinsically lack individuality and uniqueness; however, the differences between the swans gives each one a unique quality in this context. As Olalquiaga observes, kitsch objects are made unique in a collection through “selection and organisation”.¹⁰⁴

To explore the fascination of exploring variation within a category, I selected porcelain swan ornaments that possess a range of characteristics (fig. 34). These include: a large vase featuring two swans fused together; a small blue and grey swan; a swan with a gold beak, and one with an opalescent lustreware glaze. Each features a mixture of decorative elements including hand-painted coloured or gold detailing and china flowers (fig. 36-38).

¹⁰² Stewart, *On Longing*, 155.

¹⁰³ Ibid.: 154.

¹⁰⁴ Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 17.



Fig. 34. *Heirloom* (2012)

Shine

I saw painting as a means of examining the attraction of collecting glossy, shiny ornaments – a key characteristic of the collection exemplified by the porcelain swans. They offered an opportunity to explore methods of painting to describe an array of glistening surfaces, including the appearance of glazed porcelain, reflective gold paint and the pearlescent sheen of lustreware. Devoting close attention to rendering these surfaces led me to consider: Just what is it about shine that attracts the eye?

To understand the sensory allure of shine, and how I might portray it, I considered what generates its appearance. In the text, *On Reflection*, curator Jonathan Miller explains that an object's sheen is determined by the nature of its surface, which either reflects or absorbs light. As he explains:

[t]he smoother and less pitted a surface is, the more coherently the rays of incident light are reflected from it. ... The result is that... a *matte* surface... displays nothing but its own local characteristics... [and] a polished one is almost entirely due to the imagery which it reflects.¹⁰⁵

In other words, a matte surface absorbs light, and a shiny surface reflects light to convey the appearance of gleam or splendour. In this sense, glints of reflection over objects can be understood as tiny mirror images of the light source.¹⁰⁶ The sheen of an object thus gives clues to its surface texture. Different to the way light reveals the general *shape* and *form* of an object, sheen describes what *material* an object is made

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Miller, *On Reflection*, (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998), 15.

¹⁰⁶ Ernst Gombrich, "Light Form and Texture in Fifteenth Century Painting," in *The Heritage of Apelles*, Vol. 3 of *Gombrich on the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon Press, 1976), 19.

of, and thus how it may feel to the touch, as art historian Ernst Gombrich explains: “The presence or absence of reflections tells us about... surface texture.”¹⁰⁷

Given the shifting nature of the shiny surface, I needed to consider how to approach setting up my subjects so that I could manipulate and control their lighting. I chose to photograph the objects under spotlighting: a fixed light source that created strong highlights by maximising tonal variation. Using photography meant that I could freeze the mobile glints of shine in a particular place. I would first move the objects to find a satisfactory perspective that included multiple highlights in positions over the whole object, to best showcase its gleaming surface qualities. I then created still images, which I later used as a visual resource. This strategy allowed me to work in bright, naturally-lit spaces where I could mix colour accurately, and simultaneously control the lighting of the objects. Having found this approach successful, this process continued in subsequent works.



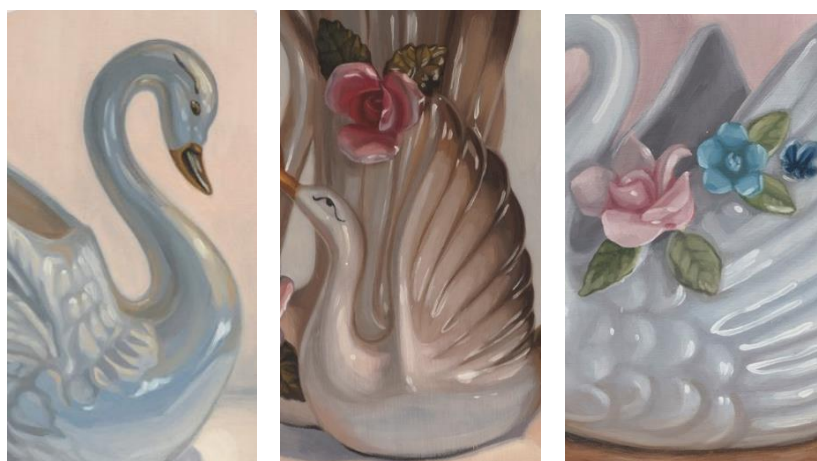
Fig. 35. *Heirloom* (2012, detail)

The next challenge was to translate the appearance of shine and opalescent sheen into a realistic painted depiction, and reflective gold into the appearance of gold. I approached this task methodically by describing tonal shifts from dark to light over the objects. Oil paint enabled me to slowly mix a range of subtle shifts in tone and colour, which I could deliver onto the substrate in multiple layers and subtly blend to show a gradation of tone. In Figure 35, I described the body of the central swan using dark- and mid-tones in blues and browns, working up to the lighter tones to describe the three-dimensional form of the object in relation to the light source. To portray its smooth reflectivity, I observed the light that hovered over the object’s form in crisp shapes of varying colours, including pale yellows, peach and light blues. I rendered the

¹⁰⁷ Ernst Gombrich, “Light and Highlights,” in *The Heritage of Apelles*, 3.

appearance of these highlights using thicker paint, in fine, delicate marks to show how they skim across the glossy surface. Fine sable brushes allowed such detail. To render the gold beak, shown in detail in Figure 36, I described the yellow reflections that occur over the deep brown colour and the bright, contrasting glints of shine.

I found that representing in paint the shifting qualities of shine generates an elusive quality that reveals clues to its allure. The surface of a reflective object appears slippery, and our inability to fix such an object, optically, in a stable way, prompts our urge to touch it, in order to discover more information concerning its form. In painting, however, we suspend our physical encounter with things, and the act of looking becomes an act of projecting touch, to test by wholly visual means a whole-body experience. Through representing the effect of shine in painting I could draw attention to the elusive qualities of gleam and reflection, to explore how my fascination with, and attraction to, these objects relates to their optically mobile surface.



Figs. 36,37,38. *Heirloom* (2012, details)

Contemporary painters who have engaged with portraying the effects of shine to explore its ambiguous appearance include photorealist Audrey Flack, American artist Will Cotton and Belgian painter Michael Borremans. The depiction of shine in Flack's painting *Jolie Madame* (1973, fig. 39) evokes a dazzling and glamorous visual effect, which contributes to conveying the works underlying *vanitas* message.¹⁰⁸ The artist's use of an airbrush to render a projected photographic image lends the work a luminous, virtual quality.¹⁰⁹ The play of light over reflective objects and the glass shelf creates an ambiguous sense of surface and space, simultaneously referencing the

¹⁰⁸ Audrey Flack, *On Painting* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 76-77.

¹⁰⁹ As John Perreault describes, Flack's rendering of projected slide imagery using an airbrush lends her works an immaterial, luminous quality. He states, "Flack's works are best seen as magical projections". John Perreault, "Light and Energy," in *Audrey Flack: Light and Energy* (Louis K. Meisel Gallery, Denver: A.B. Hirschfeld Press, 1983), 1-4.

realism of photography, whilst conveying the optical elusiveness of shine. Cotton's painting *Flanpond* (2002, fig. 40) engages with the shifting, ambiguous appearance of shine in a similar way to Flack, to engage with themes of sensual desire; the indeterminate fluid surface is portrayed with crisp edges, alluding to photography. The looser handling of paint in Borremans' work (fig. 41) highlights the elusive appearance of shine. This creates an uncertainty of surface that contributes further mystery to his already ambiguous worlds. Like these contemporary artists, I examine the mobile, liquid qualities of shine via painting to examine its optical ambiguity, in order to explore the aesthetic allure of particular kitsch objects.



Fig. 39. Audrey Flack, *Jolie Madame* (1973)



Fig. 40. (left) Will Cotton, *Flanpond* (2002)
Fig. 41. (right) Michael Borremans, *Mombakkes I* (2007)

Historically, the depiction of shiny objects in painting is connected with associations of wealth and luxury, in particular, in the *Pronkstilleven*, or *Sumptuous Still Life* genre of Northern Baroque still life painting. These paintings focussed on describing objects associated with material wealth, responding to the newfound material luxury enjoyed by

middle-class Holland resulting from the economic success of the Dutch East Indies Trading Company.¹¹⁰ As art curator Jochen Sander explains:

During the Dutch “Golden Age” ... the still life ... begins to reflect the economical life and reality of the painters as well as the collectors and patrons... what these pictures showed were the sources of their wealth – exotic spices, Venetian Glass, or Chinese porcelain.¹¹¹

I considered whether referencing this tradition might challenge ideas about the aesthetic value of the cheap, mass-produced kitsch items I depicted to convey my aesthetic appreciation for them.



Fig. 42. Willem Claesz Heda, *Still Life with a Gilt Cup* (1635)

Pronkstilleven paintings by artists including Willem Claesz Heda, Jan Davidsz de Heem, and Abraham Van Beijerem depicted a range of objects made of finely-crafted valuable materials, which held rare or exotic status. In *Still Life with a Gilt Cup* (1635, fig. 42), Heda (1606-84) depicts a wide array of shiny objects that reflect a sense of material opulence. The artist keenly observes subtle shifts in the qualities of shine over the different objects to convey their individual, precious characteristics: the crisp reflectivity of the delicate glass *roemer*, the polished patina of filigree silver and brass ornaments; the frosted gleam of the pewter jug, which suggests condensation; the glint of the fresh, juicy oysters.¹¹² The satiny sheen of the tablecloth, plush and heavy in appearance, adds another quality of sheen to the image, contributing to the overall sense of material luxury.

¹¹⁰ Sander, introduction to *The Magic of Things*, 14.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*: 14.

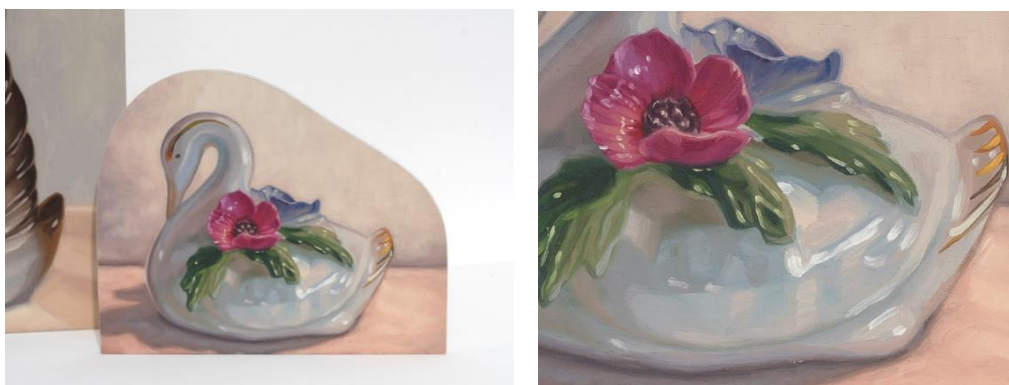
¹¹² Stephan Kemperdick, “Wine Glass and Cut Lemon,” in *The Magic of Things*, 180.

By depicting shiny objects in oil painting using a detailed and highly realistic painting approach, I reference stylistic conventions of this genre of painting, which were traditionally used to portray gleaming objects of true material and artistic value. In doing so, I portray my experience of a collision between my aesthetic appreciation of kitsch, with my engagement in, and appreciation for, the world of fine art painting with its associations of prestige and cultural sophistication – a world where kitsch is traditionally viewed as an antithesis of high art and deemed unworthy as a subject for aesthetic appreciation. As the kitsch objects are of a low artistic and economic worth, where shine is used to mimic a sense of wealth, my paintings portray the objects as they aspire to be – as worthy of aesthetic appreciation – by referencing these conventions.

Lustreware

My investigation of the attraction of shine influenced my decision to depict a swan with a lustreware glaze (fig. 43). This style of glazing gives porcelain an iridescent finish, which shifts against the light to reflect multiple colours, in a similar way that a detergent bubble shows a swirly, colourful sheen in sunlight.

Rendering the appearance of iridescence involves a complex illusion. Contrasting colours are overlaid, fused and juxtaposed to create the look of iridescence, so that paint translates into opalescent gleam. In Figure 44, the peach coloured reflections hover over the blue base colour, contributing to its iridescent appearance. In portraying this complex effect, I conveyed both my fascination with the historical tradition of highly realistic painting and my aesthetic appreciation for these 'kitsch' objects. This close rendering of lustreware is a strategy and technical challenge that I discuss in greater detail in the development of subsequent works.



Figs. 43,44. *Heirloom* (2012, details)

As well as conveying a sense of three-dimensionality via painting, I wanted also to heighten a sense of the material presence of the objects depicted by presenting my paintings as a three-dimensional display. My aim was to draw focus to our perceptual experience of the objects by re-presenting them via painting. I also wanted to allude to the personal significance of the objects by testing spatial configurations that reflected aspects of their domestic curation and display.

In *Heirloom*, I began to test methods to playfully propose the material presence of the swans in this way. My approach first involved depicting the ornaments at a life-sized scale, composed within a space that reflected the shallow depth of the shelf upon which I planned to display them. I aimed to suggest a correlation between dimensions of the shelf and the pictorial space represented in the paintings. To create this effect, I used one-point perspective: a device that art historian Hanneke Grootenboer defines as “[a] geometrical method designed to render pictorial space... [which] promises a truthful – even scientific- representation of reality”.¹¹³ My use of this device is most evident in the painting depicting the tallest vase shown in Figure 34, where parallel folds of fabric on either side of the ornament converge toward the distance to suggest spatial depth. This follows the rules of one-point perspective whereby objects diminish in size as they recede in space, and parallel lines converge at a vanishing point in the distance. In this sense the picture plane becomes a kind of window into a virtual space.¹¹⁴ I described the space in each painting differently to reflect how the objects are displayed within different locations in the home. I chose to render the paintings on plywood to enable me to transform them into freestanding forms. Once I had determined their composition, I cut out the paintings, using a scroll saw, into flat-bottomed shapes that included imagery of the objects surrounded by an area of pictorial space. I then attached small wooden stands to the back of each (visible in fig. 46).

Installation

I displayed the paintings upon a narrow wooden shelf painted white to appear continuous with the gallery space. When I viewed the finished paintings together, I noticed that the way in which I described the pictorial space differently in each piece fractured the space in the work as a whole. This undermined their reading as a unified personal collection, and so, in a later work, *Nautical Objects*, I test whether portraying

¹¹³ Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3.

¹¹⁴ In 1436 philosopher Leon Battista Alberti famously described one-point perspective as creating a window-like effect. In this sense the picture plane is rendered invisible by seeing through it into an imaginary space. *Ibid.*: 3.

the objects in a continuous space might help suggest a stronger sense of this. At the end of this chapter I evaluate my approach to displaying this work in more depth as all three works in this chapter share a similar approach.



Fig. 45. *Heirloom* (2012)



Fig. 46. *Heirloom* (2012, side view)

* * *

In *Heirloom* I had begun to examine how I might show how kitsch objects become personally valuable via collecting. By representing a *category* (the swan), I tested a way to show the value of objects, by alluding to a key principle of the practice of collecting – categorisation. In doing so I showed that the ornaments belong to a collection, and thus may hold personal significance. The variety of types of swans depicted alludes to the fascination of exploring variety within a category.

I discovered that rendering the appearance of lustreware porcelain accentuated the visual ambiguity of shine to create an effect that I found captivating. In the next work,

Lustrefish, I investigate the challenge of rendering the shape-shifting optical effect of this material further, to explore its allure.

Lustrefish (2012)

I felt motivated to extend my exploration of the optical allure of lustreware to examine how this contributes to the aesthetic value I find in kitsch objects. Rendering this iridescent material in paint accentuated an elusive aesthetic quality that appeared more dramatic than the effect of representing shine alone. By attending closely to representing lustreware in painting, I aimed to reveal something more about the allure of collecting objects with iridescent qualities.

Historically, the lustre ceramic glaze has been highly prized for its captivating visual effect. It is said to have been invented in Iraq in the early 9th century.¹¹⁵ For centuries the recipe was kept secret by its producers as, unlike today, it was a commodity difficult and expensive to produce and thus only the rich could afford.¹¹⁶ British potter and writer, Alan Caiger-Smith, explains that early lustre was mainly made for royal courts, and considered a sign of prestige, where its “noble gleam... naturally suggested wealth and power”.¹¹⁷ From the early 19th century lustre-glazed pottery was made on a commercial scale.¹¹⁸ Its metamorphosing visual effect still inspires wonder today, as Greg Daly, an Australian ceramicist internationally renowned for lustre glazing, explains:

Lustre. Even the word conjures up a feeling of desire. Watch the eyes of someone when they behold a pot for the first time... watch their movements: they are entranced by the intensity of the light as it illuminates the surface.¹¹⁹

Like shine and metallic finishes, the material quality of iridescence in lustre-glazed china is another way in which kitsch evokes a sense of faux luxury, by drawing from associations of prestige and wealth traditionally associated with this material.

Representing the appearance of lustreware was a challenge, and so to examine the complexity of the material I made a series of small studies (figs. 47-50). In these studies, I examined close-up photographs of lustreware ornaments. By working on enlarged details I could learn more about the variety of colours that contribute to the visual complexity of this material.

¹¹⁵ Greg Daly, *Ceramics Handbook: Lustre* (London: A & C Black Publishers, 2012), 13.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 11.

¹¹⁷ Alan Caiger-Smith, *Lustre Pottery: Technique, Tradition and Innovation in Islam and the Western World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 190.

¹¹⁸ Griselda Lewis, *A Collector's History of English Pottery*. 5th rev. ed. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1999), 152.

¹¹⁹ Daly, *Ceramics Handbook: Lustre*, 11.



Figs. 47,48,49,50. (left to right) Lustreware tests (2012)

Identifying and accurately mixing the combination of subtle and intense colour proved challenging, but the most significant quandary I faced in attempting to render such a material realistically involved the order and placement of paint layers. Colour and tone behaved differently on this surface compared to other non-opalescent materials, so the traditional process of working from dark to light in oil paint to describe three-dimensionality did not necessarily apply. Highlights were plentiful and varied in colour, and appeared to float over the material in curious colourful shapes.

I made a number of discoveries, which helped me to develop an approach to rendering the effect of iridescence. I found that identifying the general colours and tones underneath the array of highlights helped me determine how to layer the paint, so that I could first describe the shape and local colour of the object, and then render the colourful highlights that hover over the surface. For example, in Figure 49, I first observed the modulated pink surface of the ornament with its hand-painted gold accents, and then overlaid the multiple pale pink and yellow reflections that shimmer over the surface. I discovered that these highlights were often more pure and vibrant in colour than the main body of the surface, which is usually more muted, and this gives the lustreware its characteristic iridescence. Gaining this understanding helped me to determine how to mix and apply the paint accordingly.

Informed by these studies, I made a standalone piece called *Lustrefish* (2012, fig. 51) that depicts a fused fish- and shell-shaped vase. This work became the link to my next and larger work, *Nautical Objects*. In *Lustrefish* I experimented with describing an object that exhibited a dramatic lustreware effect. At a close viewing distance, the colours and shapes I used to depict the object appear quite formless, but the image knits together at further distance to suggest the form of an object (fig. 52). Achieving this illusion required my examining a complex optical perceptual effect.



Fig. 51. *Lustrefish* (2012)

I discovered that representing iridescent surfaces in painting highlighted the perceptual ambiguity of the material. The iridescent surface, with its metamorphosing sensation of colour, foils in a radical way our ability to visually grasp the nature of an object's form. As described earlier, the conventional experience of viewing a painting denies touch, to prove to ourselves what we see. The illusion of the iridescent surface I have rendered is paradoxically fixed and stable as painting, but appears, like lustreware, visually unstable, taking on an otherworldly quality. This otherworldly quality that iridescence conjures is, I argue, a significant aspect of our attraction to iridescent things.

Contemporary sculptor Anish Kapoor explores the captivating effects of perceptual ambiguity, creating an otherworldly sensation through the use of iridescence and shine. The concave mirror work *Untitled* (2012, fig. 53) generates bouncing reflections, making it difficult to discern its shape by visual means alone. This creates an ambiguous sense of space that, in its perplexing nature, generates fascination and curiosity in the viewer; they must shift their view to discern the shape and form of the work. Differently, in *Lustrefish*, the iridescence is *depicted* in a fixed state in the flat image of a painting, limiting the viewer's ability to grasp additional information about the object. In this way the ambiguity of the object represented remains.



Fig. 52. *Lustrefish* (2012)

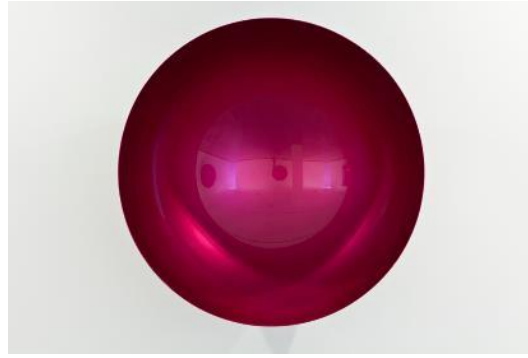


Fig. 53. Anish Kapoor, *Untitled* (2012)

* * *

The discoveries made in producing *Heirloom* and *Lustrefish* raised further questions concerning how I might convey my aesthetic appreciation for kitsch objects in the collection. Might the optical spectacle of representing lustreware ornaments challenge their conventionally low aesthetic status? This idea is explored further in a later and more complex work, *Tizzy Mantelpiece* (Chapter Three). I wondered also if representing a range of objects that possess a wider array of material qualities and accentuating the different characteristics of their various surfaces might create a richer effect of realism, a question that I explore in the next work, *Nautical Objects*.

Nautical Objects (2012)

I considered further ways in which these kitsch objects become personally valuable via the process of collecting, to find additional ways to represent the psycho-sociological value of the collection. In *Heirloom* I investigated how collecting involves categorisation according to types of objects, focussing on the motif of the swan and formal aspects of shine. However, objects are also categorised thematically, reflecting the collectors' passions and interests. As Susan Stewart explains, “[to] ask what principles of organisation are used in articulating the collection is to begin to discern what the collection is about”.¹²⁰ In other words, the way in which a collection is organised reveals clues to its hidden personal significance.



Fig. 54. *Nautical Objects* (2012)

To consider how collecting is a mode of exploring one's passions, I chose to examine the nautical-themed objects collected by Mike (fig. 54). A 'surfie' and dolphin-lover, his collection ranges from seashells to ships in bottles, to resin ornaments depicting dolphins bursting out from waves. Because these objects represent the collector's fascination with the sea, they hold personal significance to him; they function as triggers for inspiring thoughts and "custodians" of cherished memories.¹²¹ Walter Benjamin holds that personal collections inspire reverie. He states that "[o]wnership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them".¹²² This suggests that collections create a space – a kind of

¹²⁰ Stewart, *On Longing*, 154.

¹²¹ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 3.

¹²² Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting," in *Unpacking my Library: Architects and their Books*, ed. Jo Steffens (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 10.

“mental realm” – to engage in cherished thoughts and memories.¹²³ By representing objects that share a theme, I hoped to convey how objects of a kitsch nature can become personally valuable by representing meaning.

To emphasise a sense of connection between the objects, I depicted them within a seemingly continuous space (fig. 55). This contrasts with *Heirloom*, where I portrayed each ornament as situated in a different space, reflecting my process of selecting objects from various locations within the home. Setting them within a unified space emphasises their common thematic thread and a sense of a particular collection.



Fig. 55. *Nautical Objects* (2012, detail)

Contrasting Materiality

Thus far, I had focussed on depicting shiny objects and exploring their aesthetic appeal. I now sought to accentuate the pleasure I find in the specificity of various material qualities by depicting a range of items of contrasting materials and surfaces. This would also create a richer sense of realism.

Representing contrasting surfaces in painting highlights differences in physical texture and intensifies our sense of the objects depicted. As Gombrich explains: “[One] convincing highlight placed correctly on a pearl or jewel... will also, by force of contrast, help to impart on to the surrounding surfaces the effect of a matte, or absorbent texture.”¹²⁴ In *Fruit and Flowers in a Terracotta Vase* (1777-78, fig. 56), Dutch Baroque painter Jan Van Os (1744-1808) portrays a multitude of different surface qualities. In Figure 57, the soft velvety surface of fuzzy fruit skin is emphasised by the stark contrast of the gleaming dewdrops described on its surface. This effect is achieved by

¹²³ Baudrillard, Jean. “The System of Collecting,” in *The Cultures of Collecting*, 7.

¹²⁴ Gombrich, “Light, Form and Texture in Fifteenth-Century Painting,” 31.

the modulation of qualities of sheen. The juxtaposition of surface qualities creates a rich effect of realism that highlights the material characteristics of each item portrayed.



Fig. 56. Jan van Os, *Fruit and Flowers in a Terracotta Vase* (1777-78)

Fig. 57. (detail)

My desire to generate a rich and diverse sense of the visual pleasures of my family's collection now led me to depict a range of objects with contrasting material and surface qualities, including glass, wood, fabric, coral, porcelain, plastic and mother-of-pearl seashell. To emphasise their differences, I arranged objects with contrasting surfaces together. In Figure 58, I positioned the foreground shell to show its chalky exterior and contrasting glossy interior, and juxtaposed this with the gleaming pearlescent surface of the mother-of-pearl shell situated behind. To render the matte surface of the spiky shell, I observed how the light falls evenly over its peaks, using lilacs to describe the areas in shadow and working up to lighter tones by increasing the amount of white. I depicted the glossy interior of the shell with bright, stark highlights that I described as floating over a deep peach colour to show how the shiny surface catches shifting glints of light. The pearlescent gleam of the abalone shell possesses a different quality of shine, which I rendered using blues, yellows, pinks and lilacs to create a richer and more complex sense of materiality.

Detail

To render a more convincing illusion, as well as to convey my fascination and affection for these objects and my appreciation of their intricacy, I increased the level of detail in my paintings. In this way I also aimed to convey my immersion as a painter, in the intense and sustained attention I brought to rendering them. As Ruth Waller describes,

a painting describes a “way of seeing”.¹²⁵ The viewer can recognise the close observation that informed my paintings through his or her own experience of looking, where the act of observing the intricacies of a scene takes time far beyond a casual glance.



Fig. 58. *Nautical Objects* (2012, detail)

In Figure 59, I depicted the complex shape of the coral branches by painting the play of light and colour in fine detail, rendering subtle shifts in colour from the orange centre, which appears to glow through light infiltrating its core, to the lilac shadows caused by the contrasting warm overhead lighting. I described the apricot and cream surface colour directly contacted by the light and underside areas of turquoise, which reflects the colour of the ground plane. Delicate, stippled brushwork indicates the bumpy surface of the coral and the dark spots and holes that occur over its surface. This level of meticulous detail conveys the depth of my fascination for these objects, which I hope prompts the viewer to consider them with a similar level of curiosity and pleasure.



Fig. 59. *Nautical Objects* (2012, detail)

¹²⁵ Waller, “From Van Eyck to Virtual,” 24.

In his early woodcarvings, Ricky Swallow expresses a fondness for his subjects via a meticulous approach to observing and rendering them. As curator Justin Paton describes, Swallow's approach conveys a "tenderness", whereby "[his] sculpture... gives us a way to look at things – a slowed-down, mesmerised, almost reverent regard for the life that objects lead".¹²⁶ For example, in *Come Together* (2002, fig. 60) Swallow represents a skull embedded in a bean bag in fine detail, alluding to the *vanitas* still life tradition. The beanbag was a popular addition to lounge rooms of 1990s households, and the artist describes its folds, seams and slumped body with a precise rendering that conveys a regard and nostalgia for the object. With this approach, Swallow bypasses 1980s and '90s ironic views of items of popular culture, to portray objects from his youth with an affectionate view, by "secreting time inside mass-produced objects".¹²⁷



Fig. 60. Ricky Swallow, *Come Together* (2002)

Atmospheric Perspective and Foreshortening

I sought to playfully propose that the objects depicted were physically present upon a display shelf, within reach of the viewer's fingertips, in an illusionary space between the surface of the painting and the wall behind.

To achieve this, I used atmospheric perspective and foreshortening. Art historian William V. Dunning describes how atmospheric perspective creates a sense of proximity to the subject matter: "[I]f an object is sharply focussed and contrasts with the

¹²⁶ Justin Paton, *Ricky Swallow: Field Recordings* (Fisherman's Bend, Vic: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 15-17.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*: 53.

value of a blurred ground, it appears to advance.”¹²⁸ I thus used soft edges to describe the space behind the objects, and defined the ornaments in crisp detail. I also used foreshortening to suggest a spatial merging between the pictorial space represented in the paintings and actual space. Foreshortening in rendering “the distortion that is seen by the eye when an object is viewed at an unusual angle” can “produc[e] a startling illusion of reality that seems to violate the picture plane”.¹²⁹ I foreshortened objects, such as the fish in Figure 61 and the bottle in Figure 62, so that they appear to almost protrude perspectively beyond the picture plane. The fish’s lips seem to kiss the surface of the painting and the bottle base appears to enter into the viewer’s space. I thus explored ways to integrate the spatial and tactile world represented in the paintings, with the space of reality, to re-present the objects in a heightened way.



Figs. 61,62. (above and centre)
Nautical Objects (2012, details)

My interest in this effect was influenced by paintings such as *Still Life with Game, Fowl, Vegetables and Fruit* by Juan Sánchez Cotán (fig. 63). It is a common trompe l’oeil device used in still life painting historically, to challenge the spatial boundaries of painting. As art historian Seraina Werthemann describes, foreshortening “illustrate[s]

¹²⁸ William V. Dunning, *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 40.

¹²⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Foreshortening,” <https://www.britannica.com/art/foreshortening> (accessed 12 December 2016).

the far-reaching possibilities of painting”.¹³⁰ By extending the space contained within the picture, the artist enhances the illusion produced.¹³¹



Fig. 63. Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Game, Vegetables and Fruit* (1602)

Installation of *Heirloom*, *Lustrefish* and *Nautical Objects*

I displayed the three works together on shelves for formal review (fig. 64). Displaying them in this way recalled a theatre stage set. The flat cut-out paintings seemed like scenery props and repositionable figures from a toy theatre (fig. 65). Norman Bryson describes how painting can transform space into a kind of theatre; in a discussion about a room decorated with illusionistic wall frescoes, Bryson states, “[t]he actual room becomes a set, and to stand within it is to be on stage”.¹³² I found this idea appealing, as not only does it shift the notion of gallery space, it shifts the role of the viewer. If the room becomes a stage, the viewer takes the role of participant in this theatrical world. By creating a theatre-like display, I encouraged the viewer to suspend disbelief, as one does when viewing a play, to imaginatively engage with the painted representation as a kind of reality. Depicting the objects at true scale heightened the effect of realism.

In proposing the physical presence of the objects I describe, my approach also relates to aspects of installation art; a “theatrical” and “experiential” form that “heighten[s] the viewer’s awareness of how objects are positioned... in a space, and our bodily response to this”.¹³³ I distinguish my practice as distinct from this field, however, as the nature of representational painting ultimately highlights the absence of subject matter,

¹³⁰ Seraina Werthemann, “Fish on a Pewter Plate and Two Glasses,” in *The Magic of Things*, 316.

¹³¹ Heidrun Ludwig, “Breakfast with Apples, Sweetmeats, Bread, and Butter,” in *The Magic of Things*, 130.

¹³² Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still-Life Painting*, 45.

¹³³ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 6.

and as art theorist Claire Bishop defines it: “Installation art addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence”.¹³⁴ In this sense, installation art offers experiences of light, texture and space, for example, directly for the viewer to experience, whereas painting offers a representation of these qualities, and thus by nature differs from this field.¹³⁵



Fig. 64. *Heirloom and Nautical Objects* (2012, installation view)



Fig. 65. Toy Theatre Set (1866)

Another artist who presents paintings as three-dimensional cut-outs is Alex Katz. His shaped, freestanding paintings such as *Chance 2* (2016, fig. 66) allude to the material presence of the subjects but function as representational paintings on wood panel. Art critic Carter Ratcliff describes Katz’s cut-outs as “occupy[ing] our space like sculptures, but their physicality is compressed into planes, as with paintings”.¹³⁶ He explains that their presence highlights the absence of the subject matter: “The object [depicted] is perceived here and now yet it belongs to another time and space... everything else in the room partakes of another coherence, that of actual light and space”.¹³⁷ Like Katz, I

¹³⁴ Ibid.: 6.

¹³⁵ Ibid.: 11.

¹³⁶ Carter Ratcliff, “Alex Katz’s Cutouts,” in *Alex Katz: Cut Outs*, 26.

¹³⁷ Ibid.: 27.

present my paintings as freestanding cut-outs to give material presence to their subjects.



Fig. 66. Alex Katz, *Chance 2* (2016)

* * *

I enjoyed the theatrical effect of the three works and was encouraged by the response at this review. I felt that my approach to display, however, needed further development. The way I cut away the pictorial space around the objects undermined the effect of realism too abruptly, as did the thick edges of the plywood. Additionally, the shapes of the paintings and appearance of the shelves seemed indeterminate in meaning compared with the specific quality of the paintings. How then might I merge the appearance of painted representation with the gallery space more convincingly? – a question I explore in the next work, *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss the early stages of my research via three key works: *Heirloom*, *Lustrefish* and *Nautical Objects*. Each of these became a vehicle for demonstrating the fascination I have with my family's collections of kitsch ornamental objects and the collision or dissonance I experience between my perception of these objects and the wider societal view of them as being of little aesthetic or cultural value.

I began to explore how kitsch objects can become personally valuable to the collectors through being invested with personal meaning, drawing from theory on collecting by de Botton, Stewart, Olalquiaga, Schwenger, Benjamin and Baudrillard. I discovered that the practice of collecting involves categorisation, whereby the significance of objects shifts from use value, to a formal significance. I considered the range of categories in the collection and in *Heirloom* I focussed on the key category of the swan ornament, and speculated on the value of its symbolic associations of beauty and love. I examined a thematic collection of objects belonging to my stepfather Mike in *Nautical Objects*, to consider how objects can be used to explore and construct meaning about one's personal interests. I found that in the context of a collection, kitsch objects can take on a special, unique quality, in their differences from one another. By selecting a category of objects to represent from the collection, I suggested the notion of a collection, and thus alluded to the personal value the objects hold.

Via painting, I considered the allure of the material and surface qualities of shine and iridescence. I reflected on how, as a painter, I am drawn to the technical challenges and conceptual implications of rendering illusions of effects such as gloss and iridescence. I provided a detailed account of the technical approaches I developed to achieve such complex perceptual effects, and found that representing shiny and iridescent surfaces in painting accentuated their perceptually elusive qualities. I speculated that this accounts for their allure, which can provoke fascination, sensory pleasure and wonder.

To convey my affection for the objects, and the aesthetic value I find in them, I approached the process of rendering them with sustained attention to their somewhat elusive and complex material and optical qualities. By devoting such time and care, I sought to elicit a similar mode of reflection in the viewer. I drew on the influence of Northern Baroque painting to model my own affection and regard for the objects and their place in my family culture. By referencing stylistic conventions from this genre of

painting, I found that I could challenge the low aesthetic status of the cheap kitsch ornaments I portray, depicting them in a mode traditionally reserved for objects of genuine finery.

In all three works described, I explored an approach to representing objects as situated in both the pictorial space of painting and within the dimension of real space upon shelves in the display space. This involved rendering a convincing description of the surface texture of objects, application of perspectival devices and cutting out of the paintings to transform them into freestanding forms. I found that this created a theatre-like effect that encouraged the viewer to suspend disbelief. I defined my approach as distinct from installation art and more closely related to the cut out paintings of Alex Katz.

Through the discoveries made in making these works, my research questions evolved. What other categories or features of the kitsch collection offer pleasure and sociological value? Shine and iridescence were identified as contributing to the effect of faux luxury in kitsch material culture: what else creates this effect and how else might I show the pleasure I find in the kitsch aesthetic? In addition to a detailed painting approach, what other methods might I engage with to show the personal value that I find in kitsch objects? Also, how might I represent pictorial space in my work in a way that more smoothly merges the appearance of representation with reality? These ideas and challenges form the focus of Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: *Exploring the
Character of the Kitsch
Collection and Materialising
the Objects*

Introduction

Chapter Two addressed the early stages of my practice-led research, where I began to apply the processes and techniques of painting from close observation, to investigate the nature of the collision or dissonance I experience between my feelings for my family's collections and the wider tendency to dismiss such objects as low grade and in poor taste. I had spontaneously selected a range of key objects from the collection possessing characteristics that I felt attracted to and found particular personal, aesthetic and psycho-sociological value in analysing their features and significance. These included the motif of the swan, shine and iridescence, and the nautical theme. I described these objects as situated within a perspectively receding space that represented the space of my family home, and also that echoed the dimensions of the gallery shelves they were displayed upon, suggesting their material presence within the gallery space.

Building on this early exploration, in *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, *Season to Taste* and *Miscellaneous Objects*, I focus on investigating further key aesthetic characteristics of the collection identified in Chapter One to consider the nature of the appeal they hold. This includes faux high art, faux wealth and glamour, faux antiquity and portrayal of an idyllic, sweetened, cute fantasy world. In *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, I study a dazzling display of lustre-glazed ornaments that portray a narrative of a romantic kitsch world, to examine how a sense of glitz and opulence is created through gleaming material qualities, analysing this effect in Audrey Flack's work. Drawing on my fieldwork, I investigate how kitsch imitates Baroque and Rococo aesthetics to lend a faux antique quality and an aspirational cultural sophistication to these objects. In *Season to Taste*, I explore a wider array of examples from a particular category: figurative salt and pepper shakers, analysing the allure of 'cuteness'. In *Miscellaneous Objects*, seeking a more open-ended approach, I select a range of objects intuitively, based upon my attraction to painting their gleaming material qualities, including a number of Avon perfume bottles.

Continuing to draw from Northern Baroque traditions, I challenge the low aesthetic status of the objects by depicting them as aesthetically and perceptually complex. Norman Bryson argues that an artist's skill in rendering a subject elevates its aesthetic status. Lustreware glazed objects are a particularly effective vehicle for this, and I continue to engage with the complex perceptual and technical challenges of rendering their fugitive qualities. Further, I consider how my paintings portray my experience of

paradox: depicting mass-produced kitsch objects that intrinsically lack particularity, in a way that shows them as particular; depicting the objects as unique in my relation to them. Here I again reference Celeste Olalquiaga's *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* and Ricky Swallow's woodcarvings.

This chapter entails a significant development in my approach to implying the material presence of the kitsch objects I depict, to offer a heightened and transformed encounter with them. I test new materials and processes, including clear Perspex and laser cutting. I explore a mode of perspective used in trompe l'oeil letter-rack paintings, to imply that objects protrude beyond the picture plane. In removing a description of pictorial space, I situate the objects portrayed foremost in the gallery.

These three series significantly extend my concern with representing the concept of the collection via three-dimensional modes of display. In *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, I consider the significance of the mantelshelf display as a theatrical, symbolic statement, influenced by the writing of cultural theorists Rachel Hurdley and Annemarie Money. In *Season to Taste*, I explore the use of the lace doily as a symbolic motif, and conventions of gilding from altarpiece panel painting to imply the significance of objects portrayed.

Categorisation and the allure of collecting multiples is further explored to consider how the value of objects transforms in a collection to focus on aesthetic pleasure and personal meaning. I reference the wonder inspired by the variety of forms in the early cabinets of curiosities. Releasing objects from a depiction of pictorial space poses a new challenge of how to convey the idea of a treasured domestic collection and in the final work, *Miscellaneous Objects*, I test poetic ways to contextualise the subjects by introducing the use of pattern and silhouette. Working in a more intuitive way creates opportunities for new ideas and approaches to develop.

Removing a portrayal of pictorial space in my paintings releases the objects from their original location and arrangement, increasing their autonomy. This triggers a significant shift in my approach to engaging with the collection, where I begin to engage in my own forms of collecting and curating, selecting and arranging objects according to my creative response to them. I reference Stephanie Syjuko's work, which translates a virtual museum collection into a new collection. In Chapter Four, I focus on developing this approach further.

In exploring additional characteristics of the collection, I consider further the aesthetic pleasures and sociological value of collecting kitsch. In *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, I propose that the romanticised aspect of kitsch offers a hopeful, restorative view, drawing further

on the reflections of contemporary philosopher Alain de Botton. I explore the formal aspects of a cute aesthetic and the empathetic response it provokes, referencing evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould. I return to the immersive installations of Pip and Pop to explore how these contribute to the evocation of an innocent, safe, fantasy world. I also reflect on how kitsch fails to achieve convincing imitation, and how this translates into an affirming, endearing quality – as argued by social theorist Sam Binkley.

Tizzy Mantelpiece (2013-15)

In *Lustrefish* (Chapter Two), I began to explore the representation of lustreware porcelain, and how this iridescent material evokes an otherworldly sensation, creating a captivating effect of visual splendour. I considered how portraying lustreware in painting might convey the aesthetic pleasure that I find in these kitsch objects, and provide me with a way of challenging their low aesthetic status. Could the attention brought to a realistic portrayal of this material impart an aesthetic appreciation of its optical complexity?

I chose a dazzling display of ornaments that sits atop a central curved glass display cabinet in the living room. Here, in opalescent splendour, sit a number of porcelain lustreware swans of varying shapes and sizes, flanked by two hand-painted figurines in period costume. The items are symmetrically placed within the lacy parameters of three doilies. Amongst the iridescent glimmer of the swans, glints of gold on painted buckles and beaks twinkle across the scene. The scene implies an idyllic narrative, suggestive of family, and loving relationships, a topic I analyse later in this section.



Fig. 67. *Tizzy Mantelpiece (2015)*

This display epitomises the kitsch aesthetic of glamour and faux luxury that the collection exemplifies. It radiates an ostentatious quality, evoked by a combination of intensely shimmery materiality, and elaborate faux-Rococo-style ornamentation. This aesthetic might be termed 'tizzy' in Australian colloquial terms: an over-the-top glitz, or 'tinselly' effect, and is a term used fondly in my family culture to describe showy

decoration.¹³⁸ Again, this use of reflective surfaces is a characteristic of kitsch that alludes to wealth (see Chapter One).¹³⁹ The two figurines draw directly from the Rococo period (a topic discussed soon, see figs. 81,82). The central clock/barometer imitates the ‘painterly’ quality of Baroque sculpture (as analysed in Chapter One, figs. 22,23). Rather than achieving the opulence and sophistication aimed for, however, the items achieve a kitsch equivalent – a tizzy, faux high art effect, which nonetheless conveys a kind of glamour. Later I analyse how the failure of the objects to achieve convincing imitation translates into an endearing aspirational quality, promoting a comforting message that holds sociological value.

I aimed to convey my aesthetic pleasure in this tizzy aesthetic by the quality of attention I bring to painting these ornaments. But first I would consider how I might construct and display the paintings to better imply the physicality of the subjects.

I printed out a life-sized series of photographs of the objects and cut the objects out around their perimeter, eliminating a contextualising pictorial space. I experimented with placing the paper cut-outs on end, as though standing up, in their original grouping (fig. 68). This enabled me to integrate the appearance of the images with their spatial setting more smoothly, to imply material presence of the ornaments. I retained imagery of the doilies beneath some of the objects. Establishing this plane grounded the objects in space and accentuated their three-dimensionality by implying a shallow spatial depth.



Fig. 68. Paper cut-out test

I then considered how to translate these paper cut-outs into paintings. Perspex is a smooth, transparent and rigid surface that allows fine rendering. I painted the objects

¹³⁸ Slang Dictionary, “Tizzy” <http://www.slang-dictionary.org/Australian-Slang/It/Tizzy> (accessed 15 December 2016).

¹³⁹ See pages 27-29.

on rectangular Perspex sheets, leaving the background clear. In order to do this, I masked the areas to be transparent with adhesive film and finely sanded areas to be painted so that the gesso would adhere to the surface (fig. 69). This created a ground that was stable to paint upon, whilst protecting the designated clear areas from marks and scratches during the painting process.



Fig. 69. Perspex preparation

Highly Realistic Technique

Norman Bryson argues that an artist's skill in painting adds aesthetic and cultural value to the subject matter. He describes how Willem Kalf's (1619-93) technical virtuosity in *Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, a Nautilus Cup and Other Objects* (1662, fig. 70) "confers on the crafted objects its own greater wealth".¹⁴⁰ In other words, the artist's fine rendering lends worth to objects portrayed.



Fig. 70. Willem Kalf, *Still-life with a Chinese Bowl, a Nautilus Cup and Other Objects* (1662)

¹⁴⁰ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 124.

Inspired by the virtuosity of paintings such as Kalf's, I enhanced the visual complexity of my paintings to attribute an aesthetic sophistication to the objects portrayed. I rendered shine and lustre of the objects in a detailed way and kept my application fresh to convey complexity of the surfaces, by making visible the intricate web of brush marks (figs. 71-74). As I first mixed the colour on the palette then applied the paint in a delineated way, without blending, I achieved a fresh quality of mark. This was a more refined approach than my first investigations of rendering shine and lustre in *Heirloom* and *Lustrefish*, as I had now developed a better understanding of how to describe my perceptual encounter with this material. I hoped this deliberate approach to painting would portray the elusive, fugitive effects of these tizzy objects as aesthetically refined, and worthy of appreciation, through the complexity of the painted surface.



Figs. 71,72,73,74. (clockwise from top left) *Tizzy Mantelpiece* (2015, details)

Uniqueness

In using this realistic approach to painting, based upon close observation of my carefully composed photographs, I described the *particularities* of objects, which inherently *lack particularity*, to show them as unique to the collectors and to me. I faithfully show their lack of detail, in detail. As Kulka describes, the kitsch aesthetic is a schematic one, which often does not include individual features due to the nature of

their mass fabrication.¹⁴¹ This contributes to the failure of these kinds of kitsch objects to achieve the sophistication they aim for. By describing details such as the particular fall of light across the objects, in reflections over the clock face in Figure 72 for example, or colour of the lustre in relation to qualities of light when I photographed the objects (fig. 71), I show my specific encounter with these things, conveying them as distinct. Celeste Olalquiaga argues that although kitsch objects lack what Benjamin terms an “aura”, or artistic authenticity, they can still possess the values of uniqueness and personal resonance in their history and relation to a person.¹⁴² As she explains:

Uniqueness is not intrinsic to an object, but rather takes place in the historical interaction between subject and experience... Uniqueness happens when objects are personalised in the privacy of someone’s specific universe.¹⁴³

Ricky Swallow portrays mass-produced objects as unique in their personal association. In *Together is the New Alone* (2002, fig. 75) Swallow portrays a tiny bird sitting in the artist’s sneaker. The close observation of details, such as the particular fall of the shoelace bow and creases of the well-worn shoe, personalises the imagery, suggesting the idea of a particular object with its specific history in relation to the artist. This is accentuated by the use of 1:1 scale, creating an intimate effect. Like Swallow, I portray objects as particular to convey their value in my personal relation to them.



Fig. 75. Ricky Swallow, *Together is the New Alone* (2002)

When I completed the paintings I was satisfied with my description of shimmering lustreware. The complexity of the painted surface portrayed the dazzling and

¹⁴¹ Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 37.

¹⁴² Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 16-17.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*: 17.

captivating effect of iridescence sought, in a way that appeared aesthetically refined and sophisticated.

Installation

I tested a range of approaches to display the paintings, to emphasise physicality of the subjects, and to convey value of the ornaments as a personal collection. I positioned them as a group upon a piece of furniture, so that they masqueraded as real objects on a table, as in Figure 76. In a 2015 exhibition I also hung two paintings together on a wall using L-shaped hooks so that they sat slightly forward (fig. 77).¹⁴⁴

These approaches proved unsuccessful for a number of reasons. For example, juxtaposing the paintings with real objects undermined the effect of realism by highlighting artificiality of the objects depicted. I also realised the importance of displaying them as a group. By presenting the paintings together, I could show the amplified effect of material splendour evoked by the original display. Additionally, I could show the narrative the ornaments implied as a grouping of familial and caring relationships – notions that would have been lost in separating them. Finally, in their original symmetrical placement on top of a display cabinet, the objects form a mantelpiece-type display, and this signifies value of the objects as an aesthetic statement.



Fig. 76. Display Test

Fig. 77. Installation view, *Surround/s: 2015 Ceramics Triennial*, Canberra Potters Society

¹⁴⁴ *Surround/s: 2015 Ceramics Triennial* (2-26 July, 2015), Canberra Potters Society, Canberra, ACT. http://www.canberrapotters.com.au/exhib_details/surrounds/surrounds_jul15.html (accessed 16 January 2016).

The Mantelpiece

The mantelshelf, or *mantelpiece* is a display space that holds prominence in the domestic sphere. As Rachel Hurdley explains, it is a “focal point” of domestic display, conventionally used to exhibit objects of material worth and special significance.¹⁴⁵ Items presented in this space traditionally form a kind of aesthetic and symbolic ‘statement’ representative of the people who reside therein. Annemarie Money describes the living room as a “transactional space” where the private and public worlds interface, and where material culture is used as a performance both for oneself and for... others”.¹⁴⁶ Typically situated within such an area, the mantelpiece is centre stage in this performance. Conveying a sense of this mode of display would thus allude to the symbolic significance of the objects as an expression of ‘tizzy’ romantic glamour (which is itself a kind of projection – see Chapter One, page 28).



Fig. 78. *Tizzy Mantelpiece* (2015, side view)

In the final work, I presented the portrayed objects in their original configuration upon a wide floating shelf, to suggest the idea of a mantelpiece (fig.78). White and rectangular, like a gallery plinth, this shelf design presents as more sophisticated and clearer in meaning than earlier versions, appearing continuous with the display space. This approach drew focus to the paintings first and foremost, and as the works are complex in their appearance, it seemed a fitting choice. The shelf’s rectangular shape echoed that of the Perspex pieces, further connecting the paintings with the installation space.

Devoid of a depicted setting, the objects appeared situated foremost within the gallery. In removing a portrayal of a spatial context, I had thus developed a more successful strategy to convey physicality of the objects depicted. The paintings conveyed the

¹⁴⁵ Hurdley, “Dismantling Mantelpieces,” 720-721.

¹⁴⁶ Money, “Material Culture and the Living Room,” 357-358.

idyllic, romantic scene of the original display. By grouping them closely, I multiplied the optical effects of shine and gleam to create a dazzling and theatrical presentation, portraying these kitsch objects in the way they would aspire to be seen: as objects of preciousness and luxury.



Fig. 79. *Tizzy Mantelpiece* (2015, detail)

This dazzling effect, created by grouping my paintings together, multiplying the description of shine and reflection, recalled the sensations of glamour evoked by Audrey Flack's paintings. In *Chanel* (1974, fig. 80) Flack portrays a range of ordinary objects, culturally associated with beauty, that possess material characteristics of shine and gleam, including a make-up mirror, a lipstick case, glass perfume bottles, nail polish containers and a metallic string of beads. The artist's evocation of repetition of gleaming and reflective surfaces creates a dazzling optical spectacle that imbues the scene with a sense of wealth and opulence, lending a sense of glamour to objects of a low aesthetic status.



Fig. 80. Audrey Flack, *Chanel* (1974)

As identified earlier, this display exemplifies two key aesthetic characteristics of the kitsch collection, which I propose offer psychological and sociological value. These include a portrayal of an idyllic sweetened world and an aspirational imitation of high culture. By representing this display I celebrate these qualities.

The group of swans are cutely romanticised and the two faux antique figurines appear well mannered and genteel in their elegant posture and fine period dress (figs. 83-84). The style of these figures draws directly from the Rococo period and during fieldwork I viewed original examples of this genre, made by the Meissen factory at the Victoria and Albert Museum (figs. 81,82). The Rococo movement engaged with light, idealised themes.¹⁴⁷ As Gauvin Alexander Bailey explains, Rococo is a “whimsical” style that is more concerned with pastoral or exotic forms than with weighty theological or historical themes”.¹⁴⁸ The pretty, romanticised depiction of the working class was a popular theme, portraying “carefree, pastoral subjects [that] related... to notions of refuge and joy”.^{149,150} The charm of these ornaments is heightened by suggested narratives of love and caring relationships, proposed by their curation. The swans are grouped together in a way that suggests a family. As a matching pair the figurines suggest a romantic couple. Facing each other from either side, they could be caretakers of the flock of swans between them. The scene as a whole creates a fantasy of an idyllic European provincial world of an historical period, one reminiscent of Marie Antoinette’s idealised country village, *le Hameau de la Reine* (the Queen’s Hamlet), constructed at Versailles (c. 1783-87).¹⁵¹



Fig. 81. (left) Joachim Kandler for Meissen, *Figure: Shepherd* (1750-55)
Fig. 82. (right) Joachim Kandler for Meissen, *Figure: Shepherdess* (1750-55)

¹⁴⁷ Victoria and Albert Museum, “Figure by Johann Joachim Kandler: Spinstress,” <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O332331/figure-kandler-johann-joachim/> (accessed 28 November 2016).

¹⁴⁸ Bailey, *Art and Ideas: Baroque and Rococo*, 4.

¹⁴⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum. “Figure by Johann Joachim Kandler: Shepherd.” <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O77856/figure-kandler-johann-joachim/> (accessed 28 November 2016).

¹⁵⁰ Bailey, *Art and Ideas: Baroque and Rococo*, 272.

¹⁵¹ Chateau de Versailles, “The Queen’s Hamlet,” <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover-the-estate/le-domaine-de-marie-antoinette/the-queen-hamlet/the-queens-hamlet> (accessed 15 December 2016).



Fig. 83,84. Kitsch versions from the collection

As analysed in Chapter One, this kind of sweetened imagery projects a touching and hopeful perspective, which I consider as of positive psycho-sociological value. Although the idyllic imagery might be judged unrealistic, sentimental, and thus superficial in nature, its attraction lies in its offering an optimistic and restorative vision of the world, as de Botton holds:

It is a loss if we condemn all... that is gracious and sweet as sentimental and in denial... We should be able to enjoy an ideal image without regarding it as a false picture of how things usually are. A beautiful, though partial vision can be all the more precious to us because we are so aware of how rarely life satisfies our desires.¹⁵²

In this way, collecting kitsch imagery of this kind can give expression to a longing for harmony.¹⁵³

These ornaments exemplify how the imitative nature of kitsch translates into an endearing and affirming quality. As described, the figurines and central clock/barometer fail at convincing imitation of Rococo and Baroque stylistic precedents, due to their cheap mass-manufacture. While original versions of the figurines are highly ornate, brightly coloured and finely crafted, featuring skilfully hand-painted patterning and elaborate scrollwork bases, the kitsch imitations convey a diluted version of this experience: they are much less ornate and more schematic in their appearance. However, their attempt to mimic the stylistic features of the original versions is clear in subject matter, composition, patterning and scrollwork, and in their being glazed porcelain objects. This failure translates into an endearing quality. As in the case of the

¹⁵² De Botton and Armstrong, *Art as Therapy*, 20-22.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*: 22.

clock/barometer, I would suggest that the more radical the failure, the more endearing the effect.

The appealing quality that I find in these objects aligns with Sam Binkley's argument that "kitsch turns failure into cute".¹⁵⁴ In falling well short of the grandeur that kitsch aims for, failure of its forgery transforms into a sincere quality.

* * *

Using a transparent support in *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, I merged the appearance of representation and reality more smoothly. What quality of experience might I create by precisely cutting the objects out around their contour, fully liberating them from their pictorial context? In the next work, *Season to Taste*, I investigated this.

¹⁵⁴ Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System," 140.

Season to Taste (2014-15)

In *Season to Taste*, I continued exploring a way to demonstrate the personal value of kitsch ornaments by suggesting the idea of a collection. I returned to an idea I investigated earlier in *Heirloom* and *Nautical Objects* (Chapter Two): categorisation; to examine further how collecting a variety of the same type of object can be a fascinating and pleasurable aspect of collecting, which imbues kitsch objects with personal significance. In this work I also analyse the cute aesthetic of the collection.

I chose to examine the collection's variety of salt and pepper shakers. This category offered a broader range of objects than in *Heirloom*, where I focussed on swan-shaped ornaments (Chapter Two). Depicting the shakers allowed me to explore more comprehensively the collectors' delight in the formal variation of one category of object. Like much of the collection, these objects represent motifs from nature, including colourful goldfish, birds sitting in nests, floral forms and whales, where the salt and pepper spurts out of the blowholes. I selected a range of sets, incorporating a number of different birds to show their variety, such as three types of swans (fig. 86), goldfinches and a pair of flamingos (fig. 85). The recurrence of the swan motif shows the collector's fascination with this theme.



Fig. 85. (left) *Season to Taste: Flamingos* (2015)

Fig. 86. (right) *Season to Taste: Floral Swans* (2015)

A formal interest in collecting is highlighted by the practice of collecting containers. Susan Stewart describes that collections of empty vessels, including jugs, teacups and, indeed, salt and pepper shakers, signify the transformation of useful objects into the status of ornaments.¹⁵⁵ This is because there is no need for multiple objects that serve the same purpose, so this emptiness marks their new aesthetic function. According to

¹⁵⁵ Stewart, *On Longing*, 159.

Stewart, this new function is “measureless and infinite”.¹⁵⁶ Rather than filled with seasoning, ornamental containers become filled with something more symbolic, relating to such things as the collector’s aesthetic tastes or personal memories. According to the collector, the theme of birds that runs through the collection represents a notion of freedom.

Cuteness

Nature is portrayed in these objects as *cute* – defined as being attractive in an endearing manner, related to the terms adorable and charming.¹⁵⁷ Cuteness is a common feature of the kitsch aesthetic and the sweetened world that kitsch creates, and adds to its allure.



Fig. 87. *Season to Taste: Blue Whales* (2015)

The miniaturisation and infantilisation of objects renders them vulnerable, and thus cute, and this perhaps explains the attraction to collect such kitsch things. As science journalist Natalie Angier explains, “[c]ute cues are those that indicate extreme youth... [and] vulnerability”.¹⁵⁸ Evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould proposes that a cute aesthetic draws from characteristics of human babies, such as wide-set eyes and a large head in relation to the body.¹⁵⁹ The objects depicted in *Season to Taste: Blue Whales* (fig. 87) exemplify these endearing traits in their bulbous, infant-like appearance; a quality accentuated by their delicate tail-shaped handles and tiny fins. Their small scale highlights this sense of infancy further.

This kind of imagery plays on our instincts, luring consumers to buy products by triggering our innate desire to care for human young. This aspect of kitsch relates to

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.: 159.

¹⁵⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, “Cute,” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cute> (accessed 27 July 2018).

¹⁵⁸ Natalie Angier, “The Cute Factor,” *The New York Times*, 3 Jan 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/science/the-cute-factor.html> (accessed 27 July 2018).

¹⁵⁹ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda’s Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 98.

Kulka's discussion of the aesthetics of kitsch, where he argues that its appeal lies in its "basic perceptual gestalt", or idea, which is capable of evoking an immediate, intense, and pleasurable emotional response.¹⁶⁰ Regardless of its agenda, however, the cute characteristics of kitsch exemplified in the salt and pepper shakers contribute to the portrayal of a sweet, innocent world providing, as it does, a hopeful and restorative view as respite from the challenges of daily life.



Fig. 88. Pip and Pop, *Journey in a Dream (morning)* (2015, detail)
Fig. 89. Pip and Pop, *Journey in a Dream (night)* (2015, detail)

Contemporary artist Pip and Pop creates an immersive experience of a world that typifies kitsch-style cuteness. This effect is created through miniaturisation, the inclusion of infantilised animal figures such as the mouse pictured in Figure 88, and the use of pastel colours and glittery materials. The landscape is also stylised in a cute manner: the formations are bulbous and round with tiny appendages, such as the rock forms and mountains with tiny protruding floral and mushroom details, as in Figure 89. This endearing aesthetic contributes to the sense of a safe fantasy world resonating with innocence: one that tempts the viewer to imaginatively escape into its comforting folds. As discussed in Chapter One, however, contemporary artists such as Pip and Pop and Debra Broz engage with kitsch cuteness and idealisation as double-edged. The "whimsical paradise" Pip and Pop creates is one where "consumption knows no material or conceptual bounds," hinting at the darker, toxic "consequences of consumption and excess".^{161,162}

Unlike other ornaments in the collection, the shakers are made to be touched and handled. Transforming nature into cultural objects, these small, smooth rounded forms

¹⁶⁰ Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 77.

¹⁶¹ Art Almanac, "Pip and Pop: When Happiness Ruled," <https://www.art-almanac.com.au/pip-pop-when-happiness-ruled/> (accessed 24 January 2018).

¹⁶² Ibid.

prompt our desire to hold them. For the collectors, this adds to their attraction. Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai argues that cute objects encourage handling: “The smaller and less formally articulated or more bloblike the object, the cuter it becomes – in part because smallness and blobbiness suggest greater malleability and thus a greater capacity for being handled”.¹⁶³ The tactile allure of particular shakers such as the whales, elicited in part by their bulbous forms, thus seemed an important aspect to convey to show the pleasures of collecting them.

To show how this idea of touch enhances the desirability of these objects, I explored accentuating their shape and form, cutting out their external contour to highlight their objecthood. In *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, I depicted objects within a field of Perspex to suggest their material presence in the gallery. Eliminating this transparent area, leaving only the shape of the depicted object, would develop this approach.

Dutch artist Cornelius Gijsbrechts (1630-83) created paintings shaped to match the contour of his subject matter. His *Artist's Easel* (1670, fig. 90) is a trompe l'oeil painting meant to appear congruous with reality.¹⁶⁴ Specifically, this is a *chantourné*, a ‘cut-out’ representation intended to stand away from the wall.¹⁶⁵ Rendered on one flat piece of wood, with a stand attached to the back, and cut out to trace the perimeter of the easel and painting accoutrements, the easel appears present in real space, as an object at true scale. This prompted me to cut out my paintings in a similar way; not, however, with the intention to trick the eye, but to convey a greater sense of physical presence.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Sianne Ngai, “The Cuteness of the Avant Garde,” *Critical Enquiry*, 31, no. 4 (2005): 816, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/444516>.

¹⁶⁴ Trompe l'oeil literally means ‘cheat the eye’ or ‘optical deception’, and refers to works of art that are designed to blend in with reality and deceive the viewer through skilful illusion. Eckhard Hollman and Jürgen Tesch, *A Trick of the Eye: Trompe L'oeil Masterpieces* (Munich; New York;: Prestel, 2004), 6.

¹⁶⁵ Olaf Koester, *Painted Illusions: The Art of Cornelius Gijsbrechts* (London: National Gallery, 2000), 52.

¹⁶⁶ I define my approach as distinct from the trompe l'oeil genre. Rather than aiming to deceive the viewer, I explore ways to merge the appearance of painting with the display space to heighten a sense of the material presence of the subjects I depict.



Fig. 90. Cornelius Gijsbrechts, *Artist's Easel* (1670)

Laser Cutting

I began to investigate laser cutting, a process I could outsource to create precisely cut shapes from sheet materials such as wood and Perspex. Thus I could achieve more complex and exact forms than I could using the scroll saw.

I composed each pair of shakers resting on the shapes of lacy doilies. As I had found in *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, the doily served as a ground plane, heightening the three-dimensionality of the objects and suggesting spatial depth. In *Season to Taste: Red Goldfish* (fig. 91) the fish sit upon a scalloped crochet doily, which appears to tilt perspectively in space. I paired each set with a doily that accentuated their form. For example, I highlighted the symmetry of the swimming fish by complementing this with the even repetition of the crochet pattern. The wavy contour of the fins echoes the scalloped border of the doily. Rather than making the cut-outs flat-bottomed, as I had done earlier to enable my paintings to stand on end, I represented the full shape of the doilies so that the crochet imagery continued in a curve around the bottom of the objects, creating an ellipse. The doily functioned as an elliptical pictorial shelf for the objects. The paintings could now be wall-mounted, eliminating the need for a shelf.

Incorporating the doilies references the Western domestic practice of drawing focus to special objects by setting them on crocheted doilies. Historically, the doily, a “lacy cloth... used to protect the surface of furniture”, came to represent suburban gentility

and is a symbol of high class and good manners.^{167,168} Like a frame or mount, the doily draws focus to an object. By depicting the objects upon these little lacy disks, I hoped to allude to the treasured status of the objects by the special qualities that doilies imply.

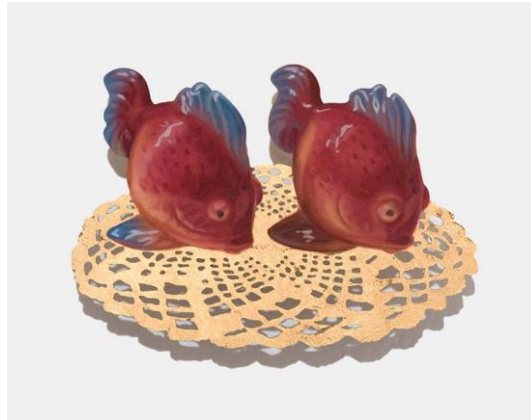


Fig. 91. *Season to Taste: Red Goldfish* (2015)

Gilding

I gilded the lacy forms because of the complexity of their shape and to accentuate this notion of personal value. Gilding transformed the openwork forms of the doilies into flattened silhouettes that showcased their intricate shape. The gold leaf also functioned symbolically by referencing the convention in European devotional icon and altarpiece panel painting of using gold leaf to imbue the subject matter with importance, as can be seen in the *Wilton Diptych* (fig. 92). According to art historian David Summers, in the devotional art of the European Middle Ages there was a relationship between “the value of ... an image, and the value of the materials of which artefacts and images are made [whereby the] outward form states the sacredness of [an object’s] content”.¹⁶⁹ The financial value of gold leaf in icon painting invested the subject matter with symbolic significance. Rather than representing spiritual importance, however, I aimed to convey how the objects are treasured by the collectors. The gold doilies are like little inverted haloes, which frame and signal the quality of attention I wish to bring to consideration of the objects.

¹⁶⁷ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Doily,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doily> (accessed 11 November 2016).

¹⁶⁸ David Wilkes, “Don’t Tell Hyacinth but the Doily is Dead,” *Daily Mail Australia*, 17 May 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-455636/Dont-tell-Hyacinth-doily-dead.html> (accessed 11 November 2016).

¹⁶⁹ David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 85.



Fig. 92. Unknown artist, *The Wilton Diptych* (1395-99)

The flatness of the gold leaf surface accentuated the three-dimensional realism of the paintings, by making the objects appear to project forward in space. The gold creates a surface that appears parallel to the picture plane, so that the objects represented seem situated on top. In Figure 93, the branch-shaped stand and the colourful birds appear to project forward from the gold. This effect is similar to the perspective of trompe l'oeil letter-rack paintings where, according to art historian Hanneke Grootenboer, the perspective of painting turns inside out and objects appear to protrude beyond the picture plane into the viewer's space.¹⁷⁰ She states: "In trompe l'oeil painting... the mathematical space that is supposed to be depicted *in* the picture has been hollowed out in a forward direction and has to be imagined *outside*, in the actual space of the viewer."¹⁷¹



Fig. 93. *Season to Taste: Birds in Nests* (2015)

An example of this inverted perspective can be found in Samuel van Hoogstraten's (1627-78) work *Trompe l'Oeil Still Life* (1666-78, fig. 94). The surface of the letter rack

¹⁷⁰ Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 54.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*: 54.

appears aligned with the picture plane so that objects described as pinned to it seem to project beyond the picture surface in a convincing trompe l'oeil fashion. This effect is alluded to in Edgar Allen Poe's tale *The Purloined Letter*: a detective overlooks a vital piece of evidence, mistaking the real letter-rack at the crime scene for a trompe l'oeil painting which was, at the time, a popular genre.¹⁷² This effect has continued to intrigue artists – a contemporary example is *Paket* (1989, fig. 94) by Yrjo Edelmann, where the wrapping paper appears to protrude beyond the painting's surface. This illusory effect is highlighted by the shape of the painting matching that of the subject matter, so that the painting appears to become the object depicted.



Fig. 94. (left) Samuel van Hoogstraten, 'Trompe l'Oeil' Still Life (1666-78)



Fig. 95. (right) Yrjo Edelmann, *Paket* (1989)

By reversing my earlier use of perspective I discovered a new strategy to allude to the material presence of the objects I portray. In *Heirloom and Nautical Objects* (Chapter Two), I used one-point perspective to create a sense of spatial depth, implying an Albertian window, into a virtual space.¹⁷³ The approach I used in *Season to Taste* inverts this perspective, so that rather than seeing 'into' a space, the salt and pepper shakers appear to project into actual space, as a *presentation*, as opposed to a representation.¹⁷⁴ Bryson suggests that in flattening pictorial space in a painting, the subject matter can thus appear to project forward.¹⁷⁵ By portraying objects on a flat ground I developed another strategy to suggest the material presence of the objects.

¹⁷² Edgar Allen Poe, "The Purloined Letter," in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2000), 132-147.

¹⁷³ Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 79.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,: 80.

Installation

Making the paintings into shapes more suitable for wall display raised the problem of installation. Until then I had designed my cut-out paintings as flat-bottomed works to be displayed upon a shelf. In May 2014, I tested a way to hang *Season to Taste* in *ReCollection*, at Brunswick Street Gallery in Melbourne.¹⁷⁶ I installed the pieces in a wavy line along the wall and made each work project slightly forward by attaching small blocks of wood to the back of each cut-out (fig. 96). This was to suggest a line of thought or imagination. The spotlighting of the gallery cast shadows corresponding to the shapes of the objects portrayed, heightening a sense of their three-dimensionality. This affirmed my speculation that cutting the figures out around their contour would imply their physicality, and highlight their tactile form.



Fig. 96. *Season to Taste* (2015, installation view Brunswick Street Gallery, Melbourne)

However, displayed this way, the objects seemed disconnected from one another. As a collection, their meaning lay in the fascination they hold in their variation. To affirm this, I hung the works in a diamond shape that echoed the perspectively tilted ellipses of the doilies (fig. 97). This created a formal connection between the works, and seemed to give shape to the idea of a collection. This installation most successfully communicated the meaning of the objects, highlighting their variation as a close grouping. Susan Stewart holds that “to group objects in a series because they are ‘the same’ is to simultaneously signify their difference”.¹⁷⁷ Hanging my paintings in a closer grouping invites the viewer to make comparisons and connections between the objects: their differences are revealed upon closer comparison, showing their variety.

¹⁷⁶ *ReCollection*, 2014, Brunswick Street Gallery, Melbourne, 23 May – 5 June 2014. <http://brunswickstreetgallery.squarespace.com/past-exhibitions/tiffany-cole-recollection-smallworks-2013-prize-winner/> (accessed 20 May 2015).

¹⁷⁷ Stewart, *On Longing*, 155.

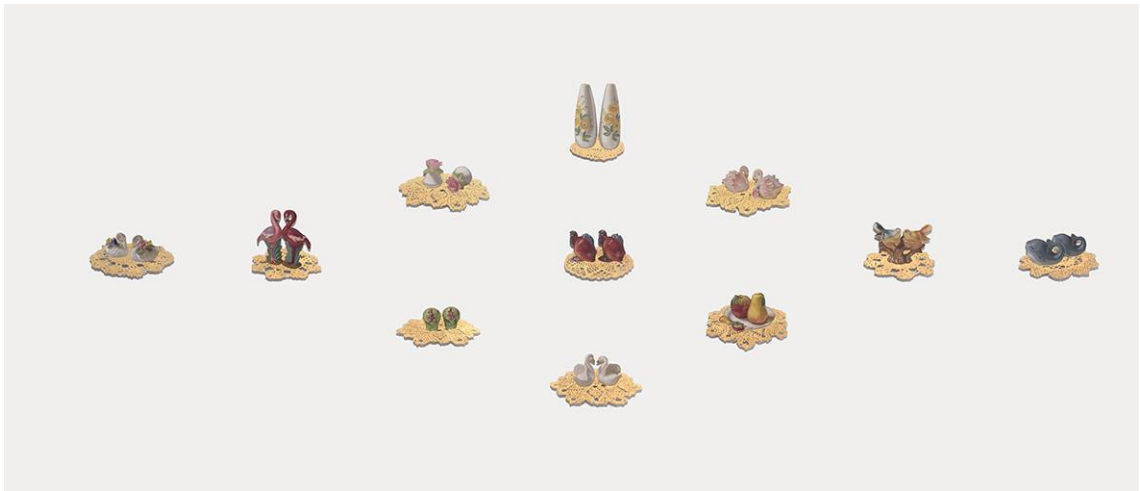


Fig. 97. *Season to Taste* (2015, installation view)

My decision to install the paintings together to show fascination in variety was influenced by Charles LeDray's work *Milk and Honey* (figs. 98,99). This work explores variation within a theme, consisting of 2000 white doll-sized hand-thrown porcelain pots displayed within a glass cabinet. Each pot is unique and was created upon a miniature potter's wheel.¹⁷⁸ Their vast number emphasises the artist's sense of wonder in their variety, a concept that underpinned the early cabinets of curiosities. Patrik Mauries explains that "wonder was the keynote" of the Wunderkammer, which focussed on assembling and classifying vast collections of natural and man-made phenomena as a means to gather knowledge.^{179,180} These private, early encyclopaedic collections were precursors to the public museum, and involved "pleasure in the symmetries and the variations in shape and colour [of objects] that [were] coveted, classified, added to and modified".¹⁸¹ Like these early cabinets, LeDray's mode of displaying the miniature objects closely together draws the viewer in to identify differences in the objects' features.¹⁸² As the objects are identical in colour, the viewer must look closely to ascertain their differences.

¹⁷⁸ Michael Petry, *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Reinvent the Still-Life Tradition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 134.

¹⁷⁹ Patrik Mauries, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, 67.

¹⁸⁰ Mauries describes that, "all knowledge, the whole cosmos arranged on shelves, in cupboards, or hanging from the ceiling... such were the cabinets of curiosities of the 17th century, the last period of history when man could aspire to know everything". Ibid.: Front dustjacket.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.: 8

¹⁸² Mauries describes how "[c]ramming together so many objects within such a confined space had the...striking effect of throwing into sharp relief the unique qualities of each piece and the marvellous variety of each collection." Ibid.: 66.



Figs. 98,99. Charles LeDray, *Milk and Honey* (1994-96)

* * *

In *Season to Taste* I accentuated the materiality of my paintings by using laser cutting to create shaped painting supports. Gold leaf grounds made the objects appear to project forward, presented as situated in actual space. Thus I implied their physicality more effectively. Might cutting the depicted objects out entirely around their external contour, without the inclusion of a ground plane, further suggest this physical presence? How else might I contextualise the objects I portray? Use of gilding opened up alternative ways to represent space and meaning.

At the culmination of this work, I began to feel constrained by its repetitive format. I also felt the need to play more, to generate new ideas and to test approaches to engage with this newfound process of laser cutting. I respond to these ideas in the following work, *Miscellaneous Objects*.

Miscellaneous Objects (2014-15)

In this next work, I explored ideas without a clear plan in mind. I wanted to open up new territory and approaches to investigate how my painting process might model, and potentially resolve, the conflict between my positive experience of the collection and the traditionally low regard for kitsch objects. This work focusses on developing ways to further suggest the physical presence of the objects I portray, and methods to contextualise them to imply their personal value as a collection. The flat quality of the gilded doily led me to consider alternative ways to suggest space and meaning in my work.

In making *Season to Taste*, I had begun to feel constrained, as with each new painting I simply added another item to a set. I missed the earlier opportunities for spontaneity and intuitive decision-making involved in *Heirloom* and *Nautical Objects*. I felt that rather than engaging with the enthusiasm of collecting and finding value in things, I had become a mass producer myself; generating a production line of paintings for the purposes of multiplication. I wanted to re-engage with the pleasure of painting to create an opportunity to discover something new.

I chose to represent a miscellany of ornaments from the collection, which I felt drawn to painting for their aesthetic qualities and distinctive imagery. This included two Avon perfume bottles, one in the form of a chariot (fig. 103) and the other representing a cat in a basket (fig. 100), a pink porcelain ornament with gold detailing, a doll made of seashells (fig. 102), a decorative plate with latticed edge, and two china figurines on a doily. Each object selected had a glossy surface or a shiny element, such as a metallic gold lid or a satin ribbon, which I knew would pose a technical challenge that I would enjoy as a painter.

I reflected on how these objects might seem unlikely subject matter for serious or sustained contemplation and finely-crafted rendering. In this project, I devoted careful and sustained attention to seemingly trivial, even absurd objects. For these very reasons, this subject matter was ideal for exploring how the craft of painting can transform the value of things portrayed.



Fig. 100. *Miscellaneous Objects* (2015, detail)

In selecting objects this way, I focussed foremost on my own experience of the collection and the pleasure I found in its features, rather than on the collectors' choice in categorisation or curation. At this point, I realised I was creating my own collection. I was re-making the original objects that I responded to, as paintings which I could collect and treasure for the personal value they hold for me, in their connection to my family. In this way I was experiencing firsthand how collecting is a process of producing new meaning and how "things act as the embodiment of meaningful social relations".¹⁸³ Through modes of selection and curation, I was reinterpreting my family's collection to create a new collection that holds value to me.

Contemporary artist Stephanie Syjuko reproduces imagery of objects she finds online to create new 'collections' of objects. In the installation *Raiders: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the A___A__M_____)* (2011, fig. 101), Syjuko presents photographs of ancient Asian vases from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco's online database, which she has translated into freestanding cut-out 'objects'. Printed at a 1:1 scale and displayed in groupings upon wooden crates, the photographs simulate the real objects they depict; the scene plays out the artist's 'raiding' of the collection. Syjuko remarks on the accessibility of imagery in the virtual realm of the internet, where "space and time have...collapsed", and topics of colonisation and the appropriation of cultural material.^{184,185} Like Syjuko, I 'remake' objects from an existing collection to construct new collections, implying the presence of my subjects by presenting them at true scale as cut-out forms. As printed digital photographs, however, Syjuko's work directly references the virtual documentation of

¹⁸³ Money, "Material Culture and the Living Room," 355.

¹⁸⁴ Zyzzyva, "From a Treasured Vase to a Cutout: Stephanie Syjuko's Solo Show 'Raiders'," <http://www.zyzyva.org/2011/06/08/from-a-treasured-vase-to-a-cutout-prop-stephanie-syjucos-solo-show-raiders/> (accessed 20 September 2017).

¹⁸⁵ Catherine Clark Gallery, "Stephanie Syjuko," <https://cclarkgallery.com/artists/series/stephanie-syjuko/raiders#slide5> (accessed 20 September 2017).

the museum's collection, transformed into object. As meticulously crafted paintings, my work translates into material form a tender, personal response to a domestic collection.



Fig. 101. Stephanie Syjuko, *Raiders: International Booty, Bountiful Harvest (Selections from the A____A__M_____)* (2011)

I decided to take the approach I used in *Season to Taste* a step further, by removing a representation of a ground plane to retain the form of only the objects. Using laser cutting, I created painting supports to match the object's whole shape in detail. In Figure 102, I carefully described the shape of corrugated edges of the skirt and bonnet to show its form. I had taken one aspect of my research to its ultimate conclusion: I had eradicated any representation of a spatial context in the paintings. I identified that, unconsciously, I had been working towards this solution all along.



Fig. 102. *Miscellaneous Objects* (2015, detail)

Glazing

In painting the pink carriage (fig. 103), I tested various ways to convey the appearance of the milk glass surface. Through overlaying transparent colour over a ground colour, I could show its luminous quality. Figure 104 shows the translucent pink, green and

lilacs layered over a sienna ground, which subtly flickers through. This made the objects appear to hold light from within. Inadvertently, I had adopted the technique of glazing: a traditional oil painting technique that conveys glowing effects of light.



Figs. 103,104. *Miscellaneous Objects* (2015, details)

Invented in Europe in the late Middle Ages, glazing involves layers of transparent paint applied over a monochrome painting or *grisaille*.¹⁸⁶ During fieldwork, I studied the effect of this technique in Northern Baroque paintings. A beautiful example I saw was the work *Still Life, Breakfast with Champaign Glass and Pipe* (1642, Figs. 105,106) by Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-84). In this painting, glowing light captured in a champagne glass is achieved through layers of coloured glazes. In my work, the luminous quality of glazing made the objects represented seem more luxurious in appearance, which juxtaposed with their endearing kitsch character to convey my aesthetic appreciation for their faux luxury. Pleased with the effect of splendour that I created using this technique, I continued to explore this approach in later works, discussed in the following chapter.



Figs. 105,106. Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Still Life, Breakfast with Champaign Glass and Pipe* (1642)

¹⁸⁶ Gerald W. R. Ward ed., *The Grove Encyclopaedia of Materials and Techniques in Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 253.

By liberating objects from a spatial context, I created a new challenge. The finished paintings were free-floating objects with no reference to any kind of spatial, or meaningful, context. How might I display them to suggest they hold personal value by belonging to a collection? Earlier, I had depicted objects within a domestic spatial context, or used the motif of the doily to signify that they belonged to someone and held personal value. Eradicating this context left them without a common thread that could point to this meaning, creating a new challenge of how to convey their personal significance.

I took the opportunity of exhibiting the work to test an approach to display. In the Melbourne exhibition, *ReCollection*, along with *Season to Taste*, I hung these paintings in a constellation across the wall (Fig. 107), to suggest how ornaments appear when displayed within a glass-shelved display cabinet. The objects appeared as if floating, overlapping with one another to form a collage of colours and shapes. In their installation, I enjoyed the way this created the sense of a three-dimensional scene and established relationships between the cut-outs. For example, in Figure 108, I positioned the pink ornament partially in front of the decorative plate, so that the colours echo between the paintings to establish a formal dialogue between them.



Fig. 107. *Miscellaneous Objects* (2015, installation view)

By overlapping the pieces, I created a sense of foreground and background. Paradoxically, after completely eradicating a depiction of pictorial space in my work, I identified the importance of contextualising the objects in some way to imply further

meaning. By overlapping the paintings, I could suggest a spatial grouping, alluding to a collection.



Fig. 108. *Miscellaneous Objects* (2015, detail)

Pattern and Silhouette

I decided to try something new, by painting pattern over one of the silhouettes. Some shapes were so interesting as silhouettes alone that I wanted to explore other ways to use them. I described a pink floral wallpaper pattern over one (fig. 109). In the installation of *Miscellaneous Objects*, I included this patterned shape in the constellation and in doing so discovered a way to broaden my practice by using alternative ways to contextualise and add associations to the objects. The patterned silhouette suggested the shape of an object, adding to the collection of 'objects' in the installation, and also alluded to the domestic realm in a poetic way: the wallpaper imagery suggested a domestic space, which helped to convey the idea of a personal collection. The flatness of patterned imagery also functioned in a similar way to the gold leaf in *Season to Taste*, establishing a flat plane upon which the objects might appear to project forward, into the viewer's space. This effect was accentuated by the way in which I installed the paintings, as sitting slightly forward from the wall and 'wallpaper' to suggest their objecthood. In this sense, pattern became a substitution for a portrayal of domestic space, having eliminated the 'actual' space around the objects representing my family home.



Fig. 109. *Miscellaneous Objects* (2015, detail)

In exploring the mystery of silhouette I was influenced by contemporary artist Sally Smart. Smart creates large wall-based artworks using silhouettes made of paper and felt, whereby the gallery wall becomes the picture plane. The work *Family Tree House (Shadows and Symptoms)* (fig. 110) is a large visual puzzle for the viewer to decode; the work invites the viewer to concentrate on deciphering the shape fragments to understand what the subject matter might be. This activates the imagination; however, Smart uses the silhouette to engage with darker themes. The shapes at first appear familiar, but upon closer inspection they are incomplete, morphing into other objects and forms to engage with the uncanny, the unsettling and the strange.¹⁸⁷ By incorporating the silhouette I aimed to create intrigue, however, to allude to imagery of the predictable, familiar kitsch world.



Fig. 110. Sally Smart, *Family Tree House (Shadows and Symptoms)* (1999-2003)

¹⁸⁷ National Gallery of Australia, "Tales of the Unexpected, Aspects of Contemporary Australian Art: Sally Smart," <https://nga.gov.au/TALES/Sally.cfm> (accessed 2 October 2017).

Painting the pattern also created an opportunity for another kind of painting experience. Describing the block shapes of colour that make up the pattern freed me to focus more on the sensuality of painting, using a looser handling of paint to describe the appearance of block-printed wallpaper (fig. 111), and slightly thicker paint to emulate the woodblock print paste. This allowed me the pleasure of working with paint as an end in itself. Although I was still connected to copying the pattern's design, there was more room to play.



Fig. 111. *Miscellaneous Objects* (2015, detail)

* * *

In this work I was guided by intuition, without a set aim in mind. Working in a more open-ended and spontaneous way created space for new ideas to develop, re-igniting my enthusiasm and pleasure in painting. This led me to discover that I was taking part in the practice of collecting myself, selecting and curating objects to construct meaning about my connection to my family culture. In doing so, I experienced the sociological value of collecting kitsch in terms of the comfort that collecting provides, through reflecting valued relationships and social connections. By releasing objects from the representation of a ground plane I created a new challenge – raising fresh questions of how I might suggest personal value of the objects and display individual paintings. Pattern and silhouette substituted for a portrayal of domestic space, opening up more freeing approaches to contextualising the objects in ways that suggest their value as a domestic collection.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the evolution of my project in relation to the making of three works: *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, *Season to Taste* and *Miscellaneous Objects*. These works focussed on investigating further aesthetic characteristics of the collection, to examine in more depth the collision between my positive engagement with these kitsch ornaments and their traditionally low aesthetic and cultural status. I significantly evolved my methods to suggest the material presence of the objects I portrayed, to offer a heightened view of them, and experimented with new approaches to displaying the paintings to convey the idea of a personal collection. Removing the objects from a depiction of their original location and arrangement led to a significant shift in my relation to them, as I myself began to engage in processes of collecting and curating. I found ways to integrate intuitive working practices into my methodology to inspire more pleasure and generate new ideas.

I set about investigating further the various manifestations of kitsch ornaments in the collection, involving characteristics of faux luxury, imitation of fine art (in particular Baroque and Rococo precedents), faux antiquity and portrayal of a sweetened cute world. In doing so, I explored more deeply the aesthetic pleasures and sociological value of collecting these types of kitsch objects, drawing on the writing of Binkley and de Botton. Gould informed my understanding of the allure of the cute aesthetic, which promotes a response of care and desire to touch and hold objects. I examined further the faux wealth aesthetic that kitsch creates through material qualities of iridescence, and its imitation of high art to imply cultural sophistication. I reference Binkley in arguing that the failure of kitsch to achieve a convincing imitation transforms into an endearing quality, promoting an endorsement of failure. Finally, I explored in more depth the allure of collecting the same type of object, and multiples of items that serve the same function (salt and pepper shakers), reflecting on how the purpose of objects shifts in a collection to provide aesthetic pleasure and personal meaning.

I extended my exploration of how portraying shine can impart a sensation of glamour, and how meticulous craftsmanship can elevate the low aesthetic status of objects considered as kitsch, discussing the lustre glaze as ideal for exploring these effects. I continued to draw from conventions of Northern Baroque painting in rendering the objects with heightened realism, and engaged with the effect of glazing to accentuate luminosity of my paintings, showing the objects' splendour. Portraying particularities of the objects in painting conveys my experience of paradox, showing kitsch items which

inherently lack unique qualities as being unique in my relation to them, a concept addressed by Olalquiaga.

My approach to constructing and displaying paintings as a three-dimensional display evolved dramatically. Using clear Perspex supports released the objects from a pictorial setting to situate them foremost in the gallery display space, suggesting their material presence. Laser cutting accentuated this materiality further, enabling creation of supports that matched the external contour of the subjects. By removing the objects from a specific context, I prompt the viewer to observe them intensely in their specificity and variety as paintings. I inverted my earlier use of perspective, so that the works themselves spatially project, eliminating the need for a shelf and creating the possibility to use the wall as a picture plane.

Releasing objects from a portrayal of their original context also led to a shift in my relation to the collection. I began to select and curate the objects primarily according to my own response to them. The motif of the doily was adopted as a device to imply personal value, appropriating conventions of gilding in devotional icon painting. Incorporating imagery of wallpaper pattern generated more imaginative, alternate means to allude to the domestic realm, and the notion of personal collections, and portraying pattern, created new avenues to explore pleasures of painting. I continued to explore methods to suggest the idea of a collection via arrangement of the paintings, the significance of the mantelpiece as a theatrical aesthetic statement, as discussed by Hurdley.

At this point I reflected upon the many layers of theatricality that engaging with the collection involves. Firstly, the objects act out a *performance*: as kitsch imitations of fine objects, they simulate material preciousness, pretending to hold artistic worth and glamour. Secondly, they perform an aesthetic function to the collectors – they signify important meaning and, in their curation, enact narratives that suggest and amplify this meaning. Annemarie Money describes that the home is a “setting for the enactment of the self”, and so within a common area of the home such as a living room, which Money describes as a “transactional” space, the collection ultimately functions as this performance for others.^{188,189} In this sense, the mantelpiece holds centre stage as a theatrical aesthetic statement. The collection formed the backdrop of my childhood, one in the form of Binkley’s comforting ontological “cocoon”, which promotes a sense of

¹⁸⁸ Hurdley, “Dismantling Mantelpieces,” 718.

¹⁸⁹ Money, “Material Culture and the Living Room,” 357.

embeddedness.¹⁹⁰ By creating cut-out paintings portraying this theatre of objects, I created a new theatre, which simulates the material presence of objects and alludes to the personal value they hold to me, in their signifying identity of, and my relationship to, members of my family and their culture of collecting.

These investigations and discoveries led to further aims and questions. Having explored the significance of the mantelpiece, I wanted to investigate further the theatrical narrative potential of the collection. Focussing on my creative and imaginative response, I was keen to continue exploring my own attraction to the collection and the particular kitsch aesthetic that it typifies. Incorporating pattern and silhouette offered a strategy to imply a domestic collection in a more poetic way than depiction of the original context, offering more creative freedom. I would now continue exploring more lyrical ways to contextualise and *stage* objects, to show their aesthetic and personal significance.

¹⁹⁰ Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System," 141.

Chapter Four:
*Recontextualising the
Collection and Resolving the
Conflict*

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analysed the range of aesthetic features that characterise the collection, including the portrayal of a cute, idyllic world, faux material preciousness and luxury, faux antiquity, and the imitation of high art conventions, specifically from the Baroque and Rococo movements. I depicted the captivating light effects of iridescent lustreware as a means to convey my pleasure in the kitsch aesthetic, and tested the technique of glazing to show glamour of the ornaments. My approach to conveying the material presence of the objects developed dramatically, using laser cutting to shape my paintings to match their external contours. Removing the objects from their original context prompted me to engage with them more autonomously, in new and inventive ways. Exploring pattern and silhouette, I began to devise lyrical approaches to contextualise the objects to imply their value as a personal collection. I identified the theatrical nature of the collection and my engagement with it.

It was at this point that I began my fieldwork, visiting galleries and cultural sites in Vienna, Munich, Amsterdam, Paris and London. Key aims were to research the historical context of the light-hearted and fanciful subject matter of the objects, to study historical precedents of ornamentation of the domestic interior, and to develop my approach to painting to convey splendour of the objects. As many objects from the collection have their aesthetic origins in the decorative arts of the Baroque and Rococo periods, I investigated original examples from these movements, studying the collections of porcelainware at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Louvre, the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. To examine how painting elicits a sense of material reality and splendour, I visited key collections of painted realism. In particular, I studied Northern European Baroque still life paintings to examine the effects of glazing in oil paint. To explore origins of the ornate, opulent interior, I visited the Royal Apartments at the Louvre, and Neuschwanstein and Linderhof Palaces in Bavaria.

Informed by my research developments and fieldwork, this chapter focusses on engaging with the collection with increasing autonomy, exploring poetic ways to curate, reconfigure and contextualise depictions of kitsch objects, to suggest their personal value and imaginative potential as a collection. In discussing the final three works – *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams*, *Scents of Nostalgia*, and *Eternal Spring* – this becomes the key to addressing and resolving the experience of aesthetic collision that prompted this research project. *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* and *Scents of Nostalgia* represent a period

of consolidating and extending technical and conceptual approaches developed in previous series. However, in the process of developing these new works, I come increasingly to recognise the potential for addressing my research question, by applying my own curation and art direction to objects and motifs that characterise the kitsch aesthetic. This results in my final work, *Eternal Spring*.

Mike's Hawaiian Dreams (2016)

In the last chapter, I began to engage with the collection more freely, selecting and arranging my paintings according to my own personal and creative response to the objects. While I found this process a turning point, it presented the challenge of how I might compose depictions of multiple objects to create a unified and meaningful work. To inform my approach, I decided to reflect further on how the collectors construct meaning via the curation of their objects; specifically, how the collectors theatrically *stage* them, to suggest narratives.

In *Tizzy Mantelpiece* (Chapter Three), the swans and figurines create a charming, idyllic scene suggestive of loving and familial relationships – notions that resonate throughout the collection. To examine another example of how the collectors construct narrative using objects in a theatrical way, I decided to explore a display of ornaments belonging to Mike that suggests a narrative of his identity (fig. 112).



Fig. 112. Mike's display

Objects include: a frame containing photographs of the collector with his dog 'Yowstar'; a mid-century wooden clock; a plastic Hula girl figurine; the lustreware vase depicted in *Lustrefish*; a souvenir ashtray with 'Hawaii' painted on it; a glass ocean-themed vase; found seashells and coral, and a series of other objects. These allude to narratives of Mike's personality and life history: memories of beloved pets, of beachcombing and collecting shells, an adoration of the ocean, and dreams of visiting Hawaii. The framed photograph emphasises the biographical nature of the display.

Susan Stewart observes that collecting is a mode of “self-fashioning”.¹⁹¹ In curating a collection, “[e]ach sign is placed in relation to a chain of signifiers whose ultimate referent is not the interior of the room...but the interior of the self”.¹⁹² This suggests that the ultimate meaning of a collection is to construct and validate the collector’s identity. Mike and Sue’s collections ultimately ‘fashion’ a reflection of their identity, representing ideas and memories that hold value to them, creating a comforting, validating space.

As well as signifying aspects of the collector’s current self, the objects in this display materialise his dreams. The Hula girl figurine portrayed in Figure 113, and the Hawaii-themed ashtray (fig. 114) belong to the category of souvenirs; however, the collector has yet to visit the island. According to Stewart, souvenirs serve as traces of authentic experience.¹⁹³ Thus, by including these objects in the display, the collector pre-validates the trip yet to come. This relates to cultural historian Susan Pearce’s description of the souvenir as having a “romantic” quality, whereby “romanticism... shows life as we would wish it to be”.¹⁹⁴ The display creates a romantic narrative that crystallises the collector’s past, present and hopes for the future.

The display is arranged theatrically, grouped to create little scenes. The hula girl plays the ukulele to the golden fish and Yowstar. The lustreware fish sits amongst seashells, coral, fallen trinkets and gold fish decal on the glass vase. A wooden shark sleeps and seahorses stand as guardians flanking the clock. Like *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, this is a mantelshelf display. Rachel Hurdley explains that mantelshelves are used to signify narratives about the people who live therein: they are important “sites where family and individual stories... [are] constructed around individual objects and assemblages”.¹⁹⁵ The personal value of the objects is reflected in their considered arrangement. In its symmetry, it creates a balanced composition and is an iconic configuration, with the resonance of an altarpiece, reinforcing its personal significance.

¹⁹¹ Stewart, *On Longing*, 157.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*: 158.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*: 135.

¹⁹⁴ Susan M. Pearce, “Collecting Reconsidered,” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), 196.

¹⁹⁵ Hurdley, ‘Dismantling Mantelpieces,’ 720.



Figs. 113,114. (above and below) *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* (2016, details)

Having considered the personal resonance this display holds for the collector, reflected in its carefully orchestrated configuration, I decided to create another wall-mounted work, continuing with a method of conveying spatial relations between objects as I had done in *Miscellaneous Objects*. In this earlier work, I used laser cutting to imply the material presence of subjects by creating supports to match their external contour and scale. I achieved spatial dynamics of background and foreground by overlapping paintings, and spatial depth by incorporating shallow gaps between them. Might I develop this approach to convey the complex spatial relations of Mike's display?

To evoke the specific aesthetic effect of Mike's arrangement, it was necessary to first accurately describe the various material qualities of these objects. For example, I rendered the soft-edged, watery appearance of spots on the shiny surface of the cowrie shell with diluted semi-transparent paint and rendered the shell's reflected light with a defined, thicker daub of paint to elicit the smooth polished surface (fig. 115). Other surfaces I rendered included woodgrain, coral, paper, seashell, glass, gold, plastic and lustreware porcelain.



Fig. 115. *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* (2016, detail)

I then considered how to display the finished paintings so as to match their original, theatrical configuration and to connect them to enrich the meaning of the work as a whole unit. In *Miscellaneous Objects*, I identified the importance of establishing a broader context or framework for the objects I depicted, to allude to their significance as a domestic collection. After testing pattern as a way to achieve this, a new aim developed to convey this idea in a lyrical way.

During fieldwork, I encountered a range of artworks composed of multiple individual pieces, connected by a larger structure or scaffolding. One such work was a set of Rococo candelabras from the Rijksmuseum (figs. 116,117). Their elaborate golden structure created an intricate, organic context for the porcelain forms in a way that enriched their splendour and unified the components. I enjoyed the imaginative aspect of this structure. Inspired by these objects, I tested a range of methods to contextualise the paintings, ultimately choosing to situate them in their groupings within the detailed structure of three large lace doily forms.



Figs. 116,117. Anonymous, *Two Candelabra* (1748-50)

Developing my use of doily silhouettes in *Season to Taste* (Chapter Three), in *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams*, I would use the doilies as a structural base to create a multi-layered work. In the previous work, doily shapes and objects were rendered onto the same surface. I searched online for suitable examples of doily forms and came across a series of tatted versions that recalled fishing nets, ideal for the nautical-themed objects. I digitally manipulated the shapes so they appeared to tilt in space, then made drawings of them and laid the paintings of the objects over their shapes (fig. 118). By tilting the doilies perspectively I evoked a spatial depth, which assisted in conveying spatial relations between the objects. The intricate nature of lace corresponded to the level of detail of the paintings, visually integrating the two elements.



Fig. 118. Paper test of tatted doilies

I created laser-cut versions of the doilies and tested multiple ways to treat their surfaces. This included the application of 24 carat gold and silver leaf (figs. 119,120) inspired by the rich effect of gold in the Rococo candelabras and my previous experience of using gilding to imply value. However, the gold seemed to overpower the subtle material appearance of the objects, while silver leaf appeared too cool compared with the warm undertones of the paintings.



Fig. 119. Gold test



Fig. 120. Silver test

I applied a transparent acrylic glaze over the wood in preparation for gilding one piece and found the material appeared 'finished' (fig. 121). Materiality of the wood corresponded to the wooden objects described (fig. 122), and to depiction of other natural materials in the work, including coral and seashell. It also recalls 1960s wood wall panelling, which seemed fitting to the era of some of the objects.

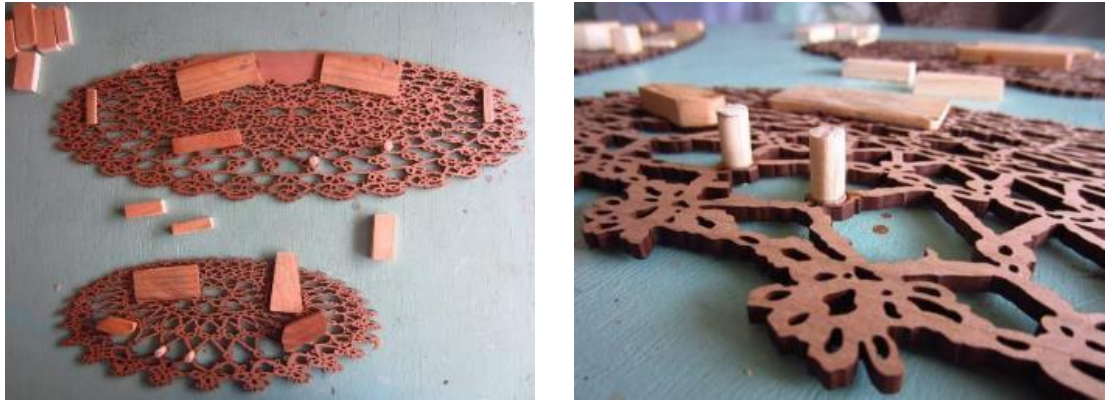


Fig. 121. Wood test



Fig. 122. Finished piece

When I assembled the work I attached the paintings at varying distances from the doily bases using wooden blocks and thin wooden dowels to portray their original theatrical arrangement (figs. 123,124). The work compresses spacing of the original display. However, via overlapping of the paintings and perspectival tilting of the doily forms, I was able to achieve a greater sense of spatial depth (fig. 125), much like in a theatre where depth is implied on a shallow stage by the overlapping of flat planes and perspectival devices. An example of this effect is in the 19th century paper theatre set pictured in Figures 126-127. This perfectly suits the arrangement of the objects, which are posed to suggest narratives, much like the cardboard figurines in the toy theatre set.



Figs. 123,124. (left and right) Making supporting blocks



Fig. 125. *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* (2016, side view)



Figs. 126,127. Toy theatre (late 19th century)

Installation

I experimented with hanging the three doily pieces together at a height similar to that of the display cabinet top, to match my viewpoint (fig. 128). The work highlights how the objects are assembled spatially, drawing attention to their theatrical curation. Their

arrangement alludes to their value as a personal collection, which implies a narrative of the collector's life story.



Fig. 128. *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* (2016)

* * *

By developing a larger scaffolding to mount a number of objects, I achieved my aim of establishing a broader context that integrated the paintings as a group formally and conceptually, highlighting the theatrical nature of the display. Returning to the motif of the doily, however, felt like a backward step. My earlier experimentation with pattern and my fieldwork experience – specifically, painting wallpaper pattern and viewing lyrical shapes of the candelabras – inspired me to explore more poetic ways to contextualise objects.

Mike's Hawaiian Dreams focussed on the collector, Mike's, relationship to the objects and his approach of curating them to create meaning. Having now further analysed how the objects are curated to construct meaning, and consolidated my understanding of the ultimate significance of the collection – to construct and validate identity – in the next work, *Scents of Nostalgia*, I re-engage with the collection in a more intuitive way, focussing on my own fascination with the objects.

Scents of Nostalgia (2015-16)

Miscellaneous Objects (Chapter Three) marked a significant break away from my original focus on the collectors' relationship to their objects as a means to explore more broadly the aesthetic and psycho-sociological value of collecting kitsch ornaments. I wanted to make another work where I explored my own emotional and creative attraction to the objects and their kitsch characteristics. In doing so, I could focus further on the nature of my experience of conflict between my love of these kinds of objects and their traditionally low aesthetic and cultural status. I also wanted to continue exploring more poetic ways to contextualise and display objects, to show them as a collection, and to engage with the theatrical nature of collecting on my own terms. Having studied examples of ways in which the collectors stage objects to construct meaning, I was keen to explore this activity myself to convey the significance and pleasures the collection holds for me.

I chose to examine further the Avon perfume bottle collection. I had already represented two such bottles in the form of a cat in a basket and a milk-glass carriage and found their whimsical imagery captivating, and their glossy and reflective, faux precious materiality a challenge to render. The bottles were released in sets between the 1950s and '70s and are mostly figurative, depicting a range of subject matter, including a mouse with a real lace veil and a terrier with a bandaged head due to a toothache. My experience of studying the light-hearted themes portrayed in Rococo ornaments during fieldwork (see *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, Chapter Three) highlighted that a significant aspect of kitsch's appeal is its fanciful, joyful nature. The whimsical qualities of the collection contribute to the sweetened world of kitsch that the collection characterises (a topic analysed in Chapter One). As well as holding personal and creative appeal, this category was also ideal to explore in a more intuitive, open-ended way, as it consists of a wide variety of items, many of which form incomplete sets.

I selected a number of examples that possessed whimsical and faux luxurious characteristics. This included a frosted glass birdbath, a frog with metallic blue eyes, a telephone with a metallic dial and receiver, a faux crystal glass container, and the aforementioned terrier (fig. 21). I portrayed these items in a similar fashion to earlier versions, rendering them in detail onto laser-cut shapes of wood to deliver a sense of their materiality. As the colour and surface qualities varied substantially between the objects, I found this process an engaging experience of discovery.



Fig. 129. First group of paintings

Like many objects in the collection the bottles are made of materials such as sparkling or frosted glass and metallic gold or silver plastic, aiming for a luxurious feel. They are, as Binkley says of similar objects “imitation luxury products... manufactured to resemble... posh, high art objects”, offering an affordable indulgence accessible to the general public.¹⁹⁶ In Figures 130-131, Avon advertisements from the '50s and '60s show the effect of glamour promoted via these material qualities. The appearance of the objects offers interesting challenges to the painter. It is a technical and conceptual challenge to consider how to render an effective illusion of a faux material effect – an imitation of an imitation.



Figs. 130,131. (left and right) Avon Advertisements from the 1950s and '60s

To render the jewel-like appearance of light infiltrating perfume in glass, I further tested glazing techniques, drawing on my fieldwork research into Northern Baroque painting (Figs. 132,134) To begin, I painted the object in monochrome. Establishing strong lights in the underpainting ensured that the colour of consecutive glazes would show vividly. I applied layers of transparent paint in oranges and yellows over the grisaille to create the luminous effect of the perfume-filled glass. I then delivered opaque

¹⁹⁶ Binkley, “Kitsch as a Repetitive System,” 132.

highlights over the glaze to describe reflections over the glass surface. With this glazing technique, I hoped to communicate my appreciation of the glamour of the perfume bottles, rendering the effect of their gleam.



Figs. 132,133,134. Glazing process

I now focused on how I might contextualise and display the paintings to convey them as a domestic collection, as well as to engage with the subjects in theatrical ways to showcase their whimsical appeal. As stated earlier, a focus of this work was to incorporate more lyrical ways to stage the objects to construct my own meaning.

My first approach was to create duplicate silhouettes of the representational paintings over which I painted pattern. Earlier, in *Miscellaneous Objects*, I discovered that pattern could suggest a broader context, implying the effect of domestic wallpaper. I chose patterns that highlighted the shape and form of the bottles, speculating this might draw attention to whimsical features of the objects. In Figure 135 the floral folk pattern complements the colour and form of the telephone bottle. The pattern's small-scaled, round gestures correspond with circular details on the telephone dial. The lilac and blue of the pattern accentuates blue-tinged reflections over the glass and metallic plastic to show its complex appearance. I tested hanging the works in a line along the wall, displaying the representational paintings in front of patterned shapes to establish a kind of 'scene' for each object.¹⁹⁷ The patterned silhouettes read like shadows, their crisp edges perhaps alluding to theatre spotlighting.

¹⁹⁷ In the exhibition *Illusion to Actual: Painting Expanded Through the Realm of the Object* (20-31 October 2015), Foyer Gallery, Australian National University School of Art, Canberra. <http://soa.anu.edu.au/event/illusion-actual-painting-expanded-through-realm-object> (accessed 16 January 2017).



Fig. 135. (left) Telephone with patterned 'shadow'
Fig. 136. (right) Dog with patterned 'shadow'

In this installation, the patterned 'shadows' not only implied domestic wallpaper or fabric, but suggested a kind of imaginative pictorial landscape. This seemed to help animate the objects. For example, the terrier appears to inhabit a pink floral realm (fig. 136). I realised that this was an important aspect of their attraction: as cute figurative objects they appeal to us to imaginatively bring them to life, so that we might engage with the fanciful world they portray. Contemporary artist Cassie Marie Edwards, discussed in Chapter One (see fig. 11), explains that she selects subjects based upon their imaginative appeal, stating that: "[t]heir personalities really draw me in."¹⁹⁸ Like Edwards, my attraction to these objects is inspired by their endearing, whimsical 'personalities'.



Fig. 137. *Scents of Nostalgia* (2015, detail of installation view)

The Miniature

Like many objects in the collection, the Avon bottles portray the world in miniature, and according to Susan Stewart this encourages imaginative interpretation. Stewart suggests that: "The miniature becomes a stage on which we project, by means of

¹⁹⁸ "All Figured Out: Say Hello to Cassie Marie Edwards's Sweet Porcelain Portraits," *Frankie* no 67, (September/October 2015), 77.

association or intertextuality, a deliberately framed series of *actions*".¹⁹⁹ These actions, which can be suggested in their arrangement, suggest a secret life, whereby "to reveal a set of actions and hence a narrativity and history outside of the given field of perception – is a constant daydream that the miniature presents".²⁰⁰ To convey their whimsical appeal, the imaginative potential of these miniature objects thus seemed a significant characteristic to portray.

In this exhibition, although the 'shadows' helped animate the objects, pairing the bottles with a complementing pattern did not draw particular attention to their whimsical features, nor did the conventional linear mode of displaying the paintings. I decided to group them together to allude to narrative 'actions' and relationships, encouraging imaginative engagement.

I expanded the collection of paintings, and also drew from online imagery of Avon bottles to enlarge the collection virtually. Rather than include duplicates, I included one of each form so that each silhouette counted as a different object. I painted pattern or flat colour over silhouettes of the online versions to imply they were missing from the collection. This move to include imagery of objects outside of the collection signals my shift away from a focus on Mike and Sue's relation to their objects, and toward a focus on my own fascination as a painter with the kitsch aesthetic, and the process of collecting more broadly.



Figure 138. *Scents of Nostalgia* (2016, detail)

As a strategy to draw focus to their quirky features, I experimented with describing only parts of the bottles. In the roller skate bottle (fig. 138), I depicted its shiny red lid as an

¹⁹⁹ Stewart, *On Longing*, 54,

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*: 54.

isolated form, and painted the rest in flat pattern. I portrayed the peacock bottle situated behind in a similar way. By deconstructing the objects and using the device of silhouette, I could make the paintings a little mysterious, highlighting their whimsy. The silhouette shapes create a puzzle for the viewer to imaginatively complete the objects – an idea that developed in an earlier work, *Miscellaneous Objects*.

My experimentation with deconstructing the bottles' imagery led me to the ceramic assemblages of Debra Broz. Broz deconstructs kitsch ceramic ornaments and fuses forms together to create strange hybrid creatures (figs. 139-141). In Figure 141, two cute poodle salt and pepper shakers are transformed into conjoined twins and in Figure 139 a sausage dog has grown duplicate legs. Her "seamless surgeries" draw attention to the odd and whimsical nature of kitsch ornaments; however, in deconstructing them, her work differs from the effect I aimed to achieve.²⁰¹ Broz's interventions mutate the infantilised kitsch animals, and in doing so seem to compromise their innocence, creating a sense of unease. Broz describes her practice as questioning the nature of kitsch representation to challenge notions of idealisation. Contrary to Broz's work, I fully embrace the kitsch aesthetic, highlighting the whimsical nature of kitsch to celebrate its sweetness and idealisation. In doing so, I explore the comforting assertion of the value of sentiment and promotion of a feeling of embeddedness, as described by Sam Binkley.²⁰² As Binkley states: "kitsch rejoices in its own feeling, of love for that which is... undeniably, and obviously loveable".²⁰³ In doing so, kitsch "fabricates a web of familiarity and comfort".²⁰⁴

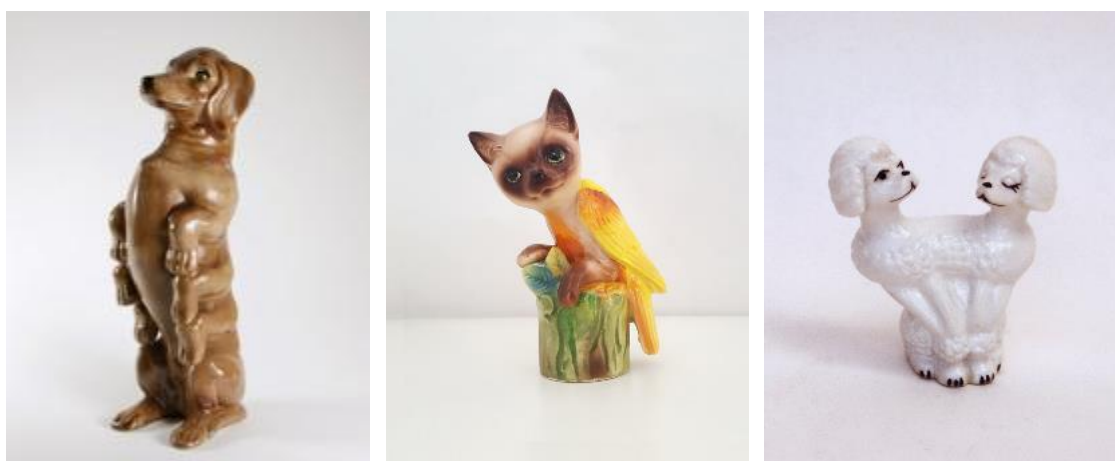


Fig. 139. (left) Debra Broz, *Octodachshund* (2010)

Fig. 140. (centre) Debra Broz, *Cat Bird* (2016)

Fig. 141. (right) Debra Broz, *Double Poodles* (2012)

²⁰¹ Debra Broz, "Modified Ceramic Sculptures," <http://www.debrabroz.com/modified-ceramics.html> (accessed 4 August 2018).

²⁰² Discussed in Chapter One, pages 18-19.

²⁰³ Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System," 146.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*: 142.

Installation

To accentuate the imaginative nature of these objects and the idea of a collection, I transformed most of the paintings into freestanding forms to display on a shelf by attaching small stands to the back of each piece. The paintings thus transitioned back into the realm of object, and I engaged in a mode of shelf display, last explored in *Tizzy Mantelpiece*. Their freestanding form allowed limitless re-arrangement, enabling me to play with modes of composition as one would with real objects. Rather than portraying the collector's choice in configuration, I was now the art director, experiencing the kind of "childlike" pleasure that Walter Benjamin describes, where aspects of arranging one's collection, including handling objects and giving them names, "renews" them by imbuing them with new meanings.²⁰⁵ I arranged silhouettes painted with flat colour and pattern amongst the paintings portraying the bottles. They functioned like shaped stage backdrops, setting the scene for the cast of whimsical miniatures, alluding to theatrical qualities of domestic display.

I arranged the paintings to suggest imaginative narratives and establish formal relations between objects, orchestrating the work as a whole composition. Relationships are implied between the subjects, spurring imaginative interpretation, without indicating explicit narratives. For example, in Figure 142 the silhouette of the mouse-groom is painted with pattern, featuring a pastel pink matching the bride's ears and featuring floral forms suggesting a bouquet, alluding to a wedding ceremony. The telephone and frog are directed toward the couple, as if witnessing the service. I experimented with ways to create a visually cohesive composition, by orchestrating repetition of shape and colour throughout the work to lead the viewer's eye around the whole piece. In the same grouping, objects that feature pointed tops are assembled together to establish a rhythm between them. The mouse bride is paired with the red glass bell, round ears and flounced shape of the mouse's skirt echoing loops of the bow and domed-bell.

²⁰⁵ Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library," 4.



Fig. 142. *Scents of Nostalgia* (2016, detail)

The final display presented the Avon collection as a quirky and theatrical scene of kitsch faux luxury (fig. 143). The glazed quality of the paintings highlighted the bottles' faux material allure. In particular, the coloured glass versions appeared jewel-like (fig. 144). Stood on end, the cut-out shapes seemed precarious in connection to the shelf, and this accentuated whimsical qualities of the objects portrayed. Their instability might also allude to the precariousness of realism of the paintings, and of the object's status, poised between high and low art. A few paintings are attached to the wall behind, slightly raised from the height of the shelf, as if hovering. This broadens the view of the objects when observing the work frontally. They thus appear in a state of transition between the wall and the shelf, subtly alluding to the shift, or collision, the work engages, between the realm of painting, traditionally displayed on the wall, and the domestic pop cultural realm of the collection.



Fig. 143. *Scents of Nostalgia* (2016, installation view)



Fig. 144. *Scents of Nostalgia* (2016, detail)

This approach to display recalled David Watt's *Knowledge* (2016, fig. 145), which represents imagery from old encyclopaedias and magazines in a group of cut-out, freestanding paintings presented on a shelf. The work alludes to the comprehensive information collected in such printed material. By transforming such imagery into objects, he references the desire that drove the early Wunderkammern: the urge to collect, categorise and display all knowledge of the world.²⁰⁶ In my work, by displaying a large collection of a category of object on a shelf, I too reference the Wunderkammer, portraying a cute, kitsch interpretation of the world.



Fig. 145. David Watt, *Knowledge* (1991-95)

* * *

In this work, I refocused on my own personal and creative response to the collection. As I had begun to do in *Miscellaneous Objects* (Chapter Three), I investigated pattern as a means to suggest the domestic context in a lyrical way, discovering that pattern

²⁰⁶ Patrick Mauries, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, front dustjacket.

could also imply an imaginative landscape, animating the objects. I stepped into the role of art director, arranging objects theatrically to convey my imaginative pleasure in 'collecting' these whimsical, miniature kitsch objects via painting.

The two works – *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* and *Scents of Nostalgia* – marked a period of studio investigation, where I consolidated my understanding of the collector's relationship to their objects and their mode of displaying them to create meaning. Informed by this research, I further established my own approach to engaging with the collection imaginatively, using the objects theatrically to construct my own meaning. In all of the works thus far, I focussed on exploring particular displays, categories or themes of object within the collection. In the next and final work, *Eternal Spring*, I broaden this view to consider the pleasures and appeal of the collection at large, exploring my experience of the domestic interior as a theatrical imaginative kitsch realm.

Eternal Spring (2017)

Having discovered in *Scents of Nostalgia* that a patterned context helped animate the objects by suggesting a pictorial space or landscape, I decided to explore this effect further and examine more broadly how the collection ultimately transforms the domestic interior into a theatrical, imaginative realm of a particular kitsch aesthetic. In this final work, my focus shifts from examining categories of the collection and its organisation, as determined by the collectors, to consider the theatrical effect of the collection as a whole. I use its imagery and aesthetic qualities as a visual language to poetically portray my pleasure in the restorative, romantic and joyful world this kind of kitsch material culture evokes, as exemplified by my family's collection. Having developed a more improvisatory approach, I create a final piece that focusses on portraying the paradox between aesthetic and sociological values of kitsch, and its traditionally low aesthetic and cultural status.

I sought to generate an imaginative space, inspired by viewing the three-dimensional scrollwork decoration inside the Neo-Rococo Linderhof Palace, Bavaria (fig. 146, see also discussion in Chapter One, page 29). The scrollwork's lyrical, organic nature transformed the interior into a kind of imaginatively animate habitat, or landscape. While other palatial sites I visited included similar features, here the scrollwork seemed animate, like a kind of gilded leafy organism. I attributed this effect to the sheer mass of asymmetrical, curvilinear, vegetally proliferating 's' and 'c' forms – a characteristic of Rococo design – which made the frond and flourish shapes appear to grow untamed.²⁰⁷

This effect was heightened by the wall-mounted shelving system that integrated with this scrollwork (fig. 147); colourful porcelain ornaments, such as vases, sat on small shelves supported by the golden fronds, like bright flowers blossoming from the gilded vines. This shelving system, termed a "Porcelain Room" or "Porcelain Cabinet", became popular during the Rococo period in Europe, when porcelain was a new and luxurious commodity.²⁰⁸ On one shelf, I spotted a porcelain swan ornament, which triggered a correlation between the palace interior and my family home. The whole

²⁰⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Rococo Style," <https://www.britannica.com/art/Rococo-style-design> (accessed 3 January 2016).

²⁰⁸ Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, "Porcelain Room from the Dubsky Palace in Brno," http://www.mak.at/en/permanent_collection_baroque_rococo_classicism?j-dummy=active&media_id=1342703965342 (accessed 15 September 2016).

interior seemed like a stylised habitat where ornamental animals dwell. This paralleled my experience of my study collection as an imaginatively animate environment.



Fig. 146. Hall of Mirrors, Linderhof Palace, Bavaria (c.1867-78)



Fig. 147. Scrollwork in the Hall of Mirrors, Linderhof Palace, Bavaria (c.1867-78)

I could see potential to use pattern on a larger scale. I began to look for imagery of wallpaper patterns that incorporated depictions of objects within pattern, such as the plates, cherries and flowers (Fig. 148), and ornaments supported by leafy vines and a bamboo trellis (Fig. 149). I saw parallels between the Porcelain Room shelving system in Linderhof and these contemporary pattern images. Their flat, graphic quality helped me to visualise how I might create a three-dimensional structure to situate depictions of objects. In *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* I used laser-cut doily shapes as scaffolding to attach multiple paintings. The repeat patterns offered potential for this scaffolding to grow, in an open-ended way.



Figs. 148,149. Printed wallpaper designs

Inspired by these sources, I envisioned creating a three-dimensional painted wallpaper relief across an area of wall, drawing from the Rococo aesthetic. This would allow me to experiment with establishing a domestic-scaled space that explores the imaginative possibilities of kitsch and of collecting; a space where cute, idyllic representations of animals and nature come to life via the imagination. It would also allow me to pose the objects within a high art context, portraying them as they aspire to be seen, to show my regard for their kitsch aesthetic.

I used the pattern pictured below (fig. 150) as a basis for my experimentation. It features an asymmetrical design of decorative flourishes and sprigs of flowers and leaves. It is thus suggestive of nature, but nature stylised. In its asymmetry, natural formations and immersive decorative style, the pattern recalls the Neo-Rococo wall decoration at Linderhof Palace, and so seemed a fitting choice for my aim to represent the interior as a kind of animated habitat.



Fig. 150. Printed wallpaper design (possibly 1930s)

In the studio I explored translating the pattern into three-dimensional form and introducing imagery of objects into this. I tested overlaying these elements over a whole image of the pattern to create a relief version (fig. 151). I experimented with

incorporating imagery of objects with the pattern, such as the figure of a dusky pink swan ornament, which I positioned as nestled within the foliage and flowers. I also cut out duplicates of the swan's floral embellishments and pasted them over the pattern. The swan and flowers appeared to inhabit the wallpaper, bringing the pattern to life; in turn the foliage imagery seemed to animate the swan and floral forms by providing a pictorial habitat. Displaying multiple pieces like this over a wall space, I could imply the repeat pattern of wallpaper.



Fig. 151. Paper collage

I chose the swan ornament as its ceramic floral embellishments, hand-painted details and pastel colours are in keeping with the fanciful Rococo aesthetic. The swan motif also characterises the idyllic and sweetened kitsch aesthetic that the collection exemplifies. During fieldwork, I investigated the heightened use of surface ornamentation in Rococo objects, such as the Chelsea porcelain piece *The Music Lesson* (1765, fig. 152). It is a veritable collage of colourful patterning, ornate scrollwork and floral embellishments, creating an intensely decorative visual experience. Art historian, Fiske Kimball, explains that: “The primary sphere of the [Rococo] movement was... in the realm of decoration... and in ornament, chiefly the ornament of surface”.²⁰⁹ In particular, the porcelain swan draws from the Rococo “snowball” style of decoration, which consists of multiple attached floral embellishments (fig. 153).²¹⁰ By emulating these stylistic conventions, the kitsch ornament shows its aspirational nature, aiming for cultural sophistication.

²⁰⁹ Fiske Kimball, *The Creation of the Rococo Decorative Style* (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), 3.

²¹⁰ Meissen, “Lidded Vase: Snowball Blossoms,” <https://www.meissen.com/en/products/lidded-vase-snowball-blossoms> (accessed 20 November 2016).



Fig. 152. (left) Joseph Williams for Chelsea Porcelain Manufactory, *The Music Lesson* (1765)
Fig. 153. (right) Joachim Kandler for Meissen, “*Snowball*” vase (1760)

Having trialled the composition in a paper version, I created laser-cut wooden shapes of the forms. I designed the wallpaper’s scale to evoke a sense of dimensions of a real interior, alluding to the domestic realm, and finely rendered the appearance of the swan and ceramic flowers. I tested a variety of methods to treat the cut-out pattern shapes to highlight how the pattern evokes a sense of the natural environment. In one test I described the pattern’s original imagery over the shapes in monochrome blue and cream and applied gold leaf over the flourish shapes (fig. 154). This successfully evoked a sense of the pattern, and the gold added a decadence in keeping with its Rococo origins. As in *Season to Taste*, the flatness of the gold leaf showcased intricacy of the cut-out silhouettes. The monochromatic blue, however, seemed a little austere for the joyful aesthetic embodied in the kitsch collection, so I tried describing floral elements in a variety of bright colours, in keeping with the Rococo palette (fig. 155). I used pinks, yellows, lilacs and greens to describe the floral and leaf forms. Applying paint in flat shapes of colour conveyed the block printed appearance of the wallpaper pattern.



Figs. 154,155. Colour tests (left to right) blue tones and gold leaf,

a range of bright colours and gold leaf

Setting the realistic portrayal of the ceramic swan and flowers against the flat appearance of wallpaper pattern heightened evocation of the object, as if the swan lived within a bright, three-dimensional patterned realm (fig. 156). In turn, the rendering of the swan emphasised the flat artificiality of the pattern. As in *Scents of Nostalgia*, flat forms of the pattern functioned like overlapping scenic props, setting the scene for the objects, alluding to the theatricality of domestic display.

I expanded the range of pattern forms and included a number of additional objects from the collection to populate this patterned realm. This included a bright blue Avon bottle portraying a dancing couple in period costume (fig. 157), and a small plastic girl on a swing from a cuckoo clock, which I attached to the work with golden string (fig. 159). The Avon bottle seemed a fitting addition as it portrays romantic, idealised imagery reminiscent of the Rococo genre. The couple are depicted as immersed in each other's eyes in an endless waltz. In their period costume they allude to the nostalgic, romantic, eternally-hopeful outlook that the collection encapsulates. The girl on the swing embodies the joyful innocence of the collection whilst playfully referencing French Rococo painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard. The cheap plastic figure of the girl in my work contrasts poignantly with refinement of the woman in Fragonard's painting, playing on the aspirational nature of kitsch.

By drawing such comparisons, I draw attention to the kitsch characteristics of the objects, staging them in a domestic-scaled setting that playfully aspires to the decorative extravagance of Rococo and Neo-Rococo interiors I visited during fieldwork. Setting the ornaments within a high art context enabled me to effectively present the aesthetic collision between the world of kitsch and fine art. By enabling the two realms to coexist, I discovered a strategy to reconcile this conflict.



Figs. 156,157,158,159. (top, middle left and right and bottom left) *Eternal Spring* (2017, details)
Fig. 160. (below right) Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing* (1767)

As in *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams*, I brought the components together to create a number of multi-dimensional pattern segments. In their installation, I used spotlighting to accentuate three-dimensional structure of the forms, by creating multiple shadows behind the cut-outs, highlighting the theatricality of work (fig. 158).



Fig. 161. *Eternal Spring* (2017, installation view)

Installation

Influenced by oval frames embedded in the scrollwork wall designs in Linderhof Palace (fig. 162), I installed the pieces within a large blue oval shape painted onto the gallery wall (fig. 161), defining limits of the work within a larger space. The blue wall reflected the pale blue in Rococo and Neo-Rococo interiors, such in Versailles (fig. 163). This colour accentuates pinks and yellows of the pattern, to create the vivid, bright aesthetic sought. (The blue alludes to the sky in perfect weather, in keeping with notions of pleasure and the ideal expressed in Rococo art).²¹¹

²¹¹ Bailey writes, “pastel colours – pinks, light greens, sky blues” used in Rococo interiors reflect the style’s “lighter touch”, relating to notions of “joy and triumph”. Bailey, *Art and Ideas: Baroque and Rococo*, 198.



Fig. 162. (left) Lilac Cabinet, Linderhof Palace

Fig. 163. (right) Pastel blue-themed interior, Cabinet de la Méridienne, Versailles Palace

Cut-out blue fronds integrate the pattern pieces with the wall to create a unified composition. Disparate patterned segments suggest the notion of pattern without portraying its complete structure (fig. 164). The blue fronds convey this pattern as emerging, or growing, from the flat surface of the wall, suggesting an animate, organic habitat for objects. As a final touch, I added a number of paintings depicting ceramic birds from the collection to further animate the work (fig. 165). I painted some bird silhouettes blue, to match the wall, and positioned them outside of the oval to suggest that the pattern might escape confines of the work (fig. 161).



Figs. 164,165. *Eternal Spring* (2017, details)

My approach to the composition of *Eternal Spring* was influenced by the work of Beth Katleman and Nicola Dickson. In the work *Folly* (2010, figs. 166,167), Katleman implies wallpaper by using three-dimensional forms. By repeating imagery across a wall, and in painting this surface blue, Katleman integrates the objects with the wall surface to allude to the toile pattern the ceramic forms draw on. Dickson's painting *Patterns of Empire-Nature* (2013, fig. 168) suggests the notion of pattern without describing it as a complete structure. The representation of segments of curvilinear forms allude to

Baroque and Rococo ornamentation, which Dickson uses as a kind of stylised natural structure to situate an array of birdlife. I found the compositions of these artists' work influential to my thinking in a number of ways, including: conveying a sense of pattern using incomplete segments; interpreting two-dimensional pattern as a three-dimensional pictorial space; and integrating the wall's surface into the work.



Fig. 166. Beth Katleman, *Folly* (installation view, 2010)

Fig. 167. Beth Katleman, *Folly* (detail, 2010)



Fig. 168. Nicola Dickson, *Patterns of Empire-Nature* (2013)

* * *

While *Eternal Spring* is a relatively modest work when compared with the lavish Rococo enthusiasm for an immersive saturation of ornament, it represents a significant shift in my research and signals a rich potential for future work.

In *Eternal Spring*, I developed a means of contextualising depictions of objects within a three-dimensional interpretation of wallpaper pattern, opening up exciting new possibilities for more complex and poetic spatial constructions. The pattern situated the ornaments within an imaginative realm, highlighting their imaginative potential. By constructing a context for objects portrayed that included painted elements, I more smoothly integrated the appearance of the paintings with the display space (a key challenge of my research). In referencing Rococo interiors, I highlighted the

aspirational character of the kitsch collection by modelling the collision between the realm of kitsch and fine art.

Conclusion

A significant focus of this chapter has been to explore more poetic ways to curate, reconfigure and contextualise depictions of kitsch objects to suggest their personal value and imaginative potential as a collection. In discussing these final three works, *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams*, *Scents of Nostalgia*, and *Eternal Spring* this becomes the key to addressing the experience of aesthetic collision which prompted this research.

Taking the role of director in orchestrating the curation of the objects posed the challenge of composing a work consisting of multiple components to create a meaningful and unified work. In *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* I returned to analysing how the collectors construct meaning, posing the objects theatrically to suggest narrative. Following on from *Nautical Objects* (Chapter Two), I studied a display curated by Mike that reflects his identity and encompasses an ideal, imagined future. This consolidated my understanding of the collection as constructing and validating identity – as argued by Susan Stewart. In *Season to Taste*, I selected and arranged objects to construct my own meaning, focussing on my creative and aesthetic pleasure in the faux glamour and whimsical aesthetic of the category of Avon perfume bottles. My experience of the fanciful, joyful themes expressed in Rococo porcelainware during fieldwork shed light on how this contributes to the sweetened world kitsch evokes. Engaging with the bottles' whimsical, miniature nature led to an experiential understanding of the importance of the imaginative aspects of collecting, and I explored generating my own narratives by arranging the objects theatrically, "renewing" them, in Walter Benjamin's terms. Inspired by the Rococo palatial interiors viewed on fieldwork, in *Eternal Spring* I broadened my view to consider how the collection transforms the interior at large into a theatrical imaginative realm of a romantic and restorative kitsch aesthetic.

Drawing further on my fieldwork, I continued to develop my technical approach to evoking the appearance of the ornaments through glazing and high realism. My pleasure in the challenges of portraying the material and surface qualities of objects increasingly influenced my choice in subject matter as I focussed more directly on my own creative response to the collection. In *Scents of Nostalgia*, I drew focus on the whimsical characteristics of the objects, testing different approaches to painting to disassemble and reconfigure their imagery. The subversive ceramic assemblages of Debra Broz were cited as a counterpoint to my celebration of the sweet, idealised aesthetic and the sentiment and feelings of embeddedness afforded by kitsch, as described by Sam Binkley.

These final works saw a significant shift in how I presented my paintings. Having previously released objects completely from a portrayal of their original context I tested ways to convey them as a collection by inventing new contexts for them. In *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* I reflected on the personal value of kitsch objects by highlighting the collector as curator, constructing multi-layered paintings to allude to their theatrical arrangement. In *Scents of Nostalgia* I explored lyrical ways to incorporate pattern and silhouette to suggest a domestic context and the notion of an incomplete collection. I returned to displaying my work on a shelf to establish formal rhythms and dialogues and suggest narratives. David Watt's work *Knowledge* informed my approach to showing the whimsical qualities of the kitsch collection, via display that alludes to the Wunderkammer.

Finally, in *Eternal Spring*, by contextualising objects within a Rococo-themed pattern, I played on the aspirational qualities of kitsch ornaments and embraced kitsch's affirming effects as discussed by Binkley, poetically resolving the experience of aesthetic conflict which has driven my research by portraying the collision between the realm of kitsch and fine art.

Across these three bodies of work I created avenues for more spontaneity and innovation in my practice. These became an imaginative departure from earlier pieces, which has opened up exciting potential for future work.

Conclusion

This project emerged from my conflicting experience of childhood associations with kitsch as a source of beauty, positivity and emotional attachment, and the disparaging view of kitsch traditionally presented in art, history and theory, which I have encountered in my development as a painter. This fuelled a quest to investigate the attraction of this aspect of material culture through the art of painting, to explore relations between cultural values and pleasures of kitsch, and the cultural and aesthetic values, and language, of high art. I have sought to manifest this conflict visually, to reconcile it, by allowing these paradoxical experiences to co-exist as painting.

I set out to interrogate kitsch objects from my family's collection, and offer an elevated, affectionate view of them, by portraying them as visually complex and captivating. My project bridged traditional highly-realistic painting techniques with contemporary art practices and processes of three-dimensional display, to create a cross-cultural dialogue between the kitsch imagery of my upbringing, the vernacular culture of domestic collecting, and the 'high art' of painting. This reflects my sense of inhabiting two very different worlds, which, brought together, enrich each other. It is this combination, or collision, of the past and present, local suburban culture and art history, which has made this project distinctive.

Over my period of candidature, I have produced nine bodies of work and I have described the chronological development of these in detail across three chapters. These works included: *Heirloom, Lustrefish, and Nautical Objects* (Chapter Two); *Tizzy Mantelpiece, Season to Taste and Miscellaneous Objects* (Chapter Three); and *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams, Scents of Nostalgia and Eternal Spring* (Chapter Four). To conclude, I will summarise the key themes and findings of my research.

I began this exegesis by outlining the theoretical context of my sense of cultural collision: the historical and contemporary views of kitsch and the place of kitsch in contemporary visual art practice. I analysed the range of aesthetic characteristics in my family collection, proposing that these features can be seen as having their own particular aesthetic and psycho-sociological value. In challenging the limiting, conventionally negative views of kitsch, as by Clement Greenberg, Hermann Broch and Gillo Dorfles, I have taken a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on current cultural theory and sociological, philosophical and scientific thought. Contemporary re-evaluations of kitsch in the work of Sam Binkley, Celeste Olalquiaga, Daniel Miller and Alain de Botton, among others, supported my conviction that the objects in my family's collection display qualities of aesthetic, psychological and sociological value.

Sociologist Sam Binkley's essay, *Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy*, proved key to countering traditional discourse on kitsch. His sees kitsch as promoting a comforting message, that "re-embeds" consumers by bracketing uncertainties and existential questions with "reassuring traditions and habits of thought".²¹²

Kitsch reduces all the complexity, desperation and paradox of human experience to simple sentiment... and calls out our forgotten love and wonderment in all things wholesome, simple and contained within a closed system of signs.²¹³

Binkley's perspective thus confirmed my own experience and conceptually contextualised the approach I undertook in the studio.

I have also drawn from theory on collecting and material culture, as discussed by Susan Stewart, Sherry Turkle, Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Alain de Botton, and Annemarie Money, to argue that the practice of collecting and displaying objects within the home is a mode of creating a controllable, comforting and imaginative world that ultimately reflects and validates the collector's identity. I have further contextualised my project as drawing on the historical precedent of the Wunderkammer, in its categorisation and emphasis on generating wonder.

My research is situated within the field of contemporary arts practices engaged with kitsch, considering a range of responses from ironic to affectionate, complex and nuanced. These include Audrey Flack, Lucy Culliton, Ricky Swallow, Pip and Pop, Cassie Marie Edwards and Debra Broz. As a counterpoint to my approach, I have discussed the ambivalence and irony of Jeff Koons' work.

I have identified those formal and aesthetic features of my family collection, which, I argue, are of significant psycho-sociological value and are conducive to pleasure. These include a (failed) imitation of grandeur and wealth, faux high art, and the depiction of a radiant, idealised, cute world. Kitsch can offer an affordable experience of luxury, symbolising wealth via the fakery of reflective and illusionistic surface qualities. Binkley argues kitsch turns this failed imitation into an endearing, aspirational quality, a sign of human frailty, and kitsch as redeemed by "the maximisation of charm".²¹⁴ This accords with my experience of my family's collection. While cuteness is accounted for by Stephen Jay Gould in evolutionary terms as generating a response of

²¹² Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System," 135.

²¹³ Ibid.: 145.

²¹⁴ Ibid.: 140.

parental care, in psychological terms cuteness delivers us a sense of an innocent, carefree and hopeful world.²¹⁵

In exploring the material qualities of the collection, I have particularly focussed on shine and iridescence and the technical challenge of portraying these effects in painting. Shine and iridescence, as exemplified in lustreware, are optically complex, visually intriguing phenomena, activated as we move in relation to them. I have found portraying this elusive effect in still painted images, and highlighting its perceptual ambiguity, to be a compelling and ultimately satisfying challenge. By amplifying the optical effects of shine via composition and fine rendering, I have translated the glitzy appearance of kitsch objects to approach the true glamour and aesthetic sophistication to which kitsch aspires. Contemporary artists Ricky Swallow and Audrey Flack here influenced my approach. In several series, I adopted the motif of the lace doily gilded in the manner of icon panel painting, to further heighten the status of the objects I chose to paint.

My studio research has involved exploring ways to combine highly realistic painting techniques dating back to the 15th century, with contemporary modes of three-dimensional display. I have thus found my own way of reflecting on the culture of kitsch, bypassing Pop and Postmodernism, and drawing on my appreciation of, and immersion in, the history of still life painting as a tradition of interrogating aspects of material culture.

By using painting to analyse the aesthetic characteristics of, and my response to, the objects, I studied the work of Northern European Baroque painters, where “attentive looking, transcribed by the hand” was “celebrated as giving basic access to knowledge and understanding of the world”.²¹⁶ The close observation evident in paintings of Abraham Mignon, Pieter Claesz and Willem Claesz Heda, including their rendering of shine and iridescence, was of direct influence in the studio. By engaging with processes and traditions of Northern Baroque still life and portraying kitsch ornaments through the venerated craft of oil painting, I have applied Norman Bryson’s notion that the virtuosity of painting confers on the subject matter its own greater worth.²¹⁷

A meticulous approach to describing the appearance of things in painting reflects the artist’s sustained quality of observation, looking and rendering, conveying a fascination

²¹⁵ Gould, *The Panda’s Thumb*, 98.

²¹⁶ Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, 72.

²¹⁷ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 124.

with the subject. However, in depicting objects in meticulous detail, I have also portrayed an experience of paradox. Although kitsch objects lack the intrinsic artistic authenticity, or *aura*, as described by Walter Benjamin, they can hold significant personal value, and in this sense they become unique by association, as Celeste Olalquiaga describes.²¹⁸

I have presented my paintings as three-dimensional displays in a range of ways to draw heightened focus on our perceptual experience of the objects, and show their personal significance both via their curation, and in the ways I contextualise them. Through testing alternative materials and methods, including transparent Perspex and then laser cutting, I incrementally removed the representation of pictorial space in the work and, in doing so, I came to locate the subject matter foremost in the gallery space. Inspired by the trompe l'oeil chantourné works of Cornelius Gijsbrechts, I cut out the subject matter around its contour, thus *presenting* the objects depicted, rather than representing them, implying their presence as projecting beyond the picture plane into the viewer's space.²¹⁹

More closely related to theatre scene props, than to installation and trompe l'oeil genres, these cut-out paintings playfully suggest the material presence of imagery by giving each piece a freestanding form. I have reflected on the theatrical nature of the collection, how the objects are staged in particular ways to convey meaning and imply narratives, and how my cut-out paintings reflect this quality. I have further contextualised the cut-outs with reference to contemporary artists David Watts, Alex Katz and Stephanie Syjuko. In considering my approach to display, I examined how perspectival devices can allude to both spatial depth, and a rupturing of the picture plane, so that subjects appear to protrude beyond the picture plane, informed by the writing of Hanneke Grootenboer and William V. Dunning.

Composing my paintings into various specific configurations, I have implied the objects' personal value by alluding to the notion of a domestic collection. The role of mantelpiece in domestic decor as a symbolic theatrical statement, as described by Rachel Hurdley, also informed my appreciation of how the curation and display of objects orchestrates personal meaning, where a collection functions as a kind of performance for others – an “enactment of the self”.²²⁰ Investigating motivations and processes of collecting, I used the example of the swan to discuss categorisation as a

²¹⁸ Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, 16-17.

²¹⁹ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 79.

²²⁰ Hurdley, “Dismantling Mantelpieces,” 718.

thematic and formal interest in objects. For the collector, a formal interest in objects overrides its utility value and kitsch objects become unique in their differences to one another, and via selection and curation.

My project was enriched by the experience of fieldwork in Europe, enabling me to view, at firsthand, spectacular examples of Rococo and Baroque ornamentation as the aesthetic precedents driving the aspirations of many ornaments in the collection. The ornate interiors of the Neo-Rococo Linderhof Palace in Bavaria, and royal apartments at the Louvre Museum, were key influences on my later bodies of work. I also studied key collections of illusionistic still life paintings, which enriched my painting techniques.

As my project developed I came to engage in aspects of collecting myself, selecting and curating objects to construct new meanings. Isolating represented objects from a spatial context led me to explore pattern and silhouette as a means to invent new, more poetic ways to allude to the domestic realm. The interiors visited on fieldwork generated new ideas of how to situate and install my paintings. My practice thus became significantly more open-ended and my process more intuitive. Both theoretical and studio-based aspects of my research increasingly supported the concept of collecting as a creative mode of production, where kitsch objects are given new meanings and personal significance. As Money argues, rather than passive consumers, contemporary collectors are producers of new meanings through their choices in selection and arrangement.²²¹

In my final three works I focussed on reconfiguring and recontextualising kitsch imagery in lyrical ways to show their value as a domestic collection, exploring the collection more freely to consider my own creative and emotional attraction to this aesthetic. *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* consolidated previous research as to how collecting constructs and validates identity. Overlapping paintings and incorporating perspectival devices created a compression of space that alludes to conventions of stage set design, incorporating multiple paintings, and adapting the doily motif, unifying the objects portrayed conceptually and formally.

In *Scents of Nostalgia* I focussed on my pleasure in the whimsical aesthetic of the Avon perfume bottles and on rendering their faux precious material qualities. Becoming collector and art director, I created my own narratives by theatrically arranging the depicted objects in groups upon a shelf, as one would real ornaments; “renewing” the

²²¹ Money, “Material Culture and the Living Room” 358.

objects by giving them new meaning, a process Walter Benjamin describes as engendering childlike joy.²²² Staging rendered bottles amongst silhouettes painted with pattern and flat colour animated them, showcasing how engaging imaginatively with the collection is key to accessing the radiant, hopeful kitsch world the collection generates.

In developing my final work, *Eternal Spring*, I considered how the collection transforms the domestic interior into an integrated theatrical, imaginative and restorative kitsch realm. In this large wall-mounted work, I reconfigured imagery from the collection to create my own composition, to poetically convey the pleasures I find in the kitsch aesthetic. Expanding on pattern as a device for contextualising objects, I adopted pattern as imaginative landscape, inspired by the Neo-Rococo three-dimensional scrollwork at the Linderhof Palace, Bavaria. Relocating domestic kitsch ornaments within this high art context playfully highlighted their aspirational nature. In *Eternal Spring* I found a lyrical and creative way to convey and resolve the aesthetic collision, which drives this research.

The collections of objects in my family home have proved a richly engaging and challenging territory for my painting-based doctoral research, resulting in nine bodies of work. I have used the craft of painting to investigate key characteristics of kitsch ornaments: the imagery they present to us; their physical features and configurations; and the allure of their specific material and aesthetic characteristics, as evident in my family's collection. Through an intense and sustained practice-based study of these specific and personal collections, I have discovered the complexities of our sensory and psychological engagement with them. I have applied the art of painting to convey my fascination with the kitsch aesthetic and to encourage my viewers to attend to these objects in a heightened way, challenging traditional assumptions as to their cultural and sociological value.

I began with a sense of cultural collision between the experiences of my upbringing and traditional art scholarship; between the mass-produced, vernacular forms of kitsch and the aesthetic criticism and technical craft of high art. I conclude, having developed in the practice of contemporary painting, a realm wherein such paradoxes can be creatively played out, modelled and resolved.

²²² Benjamin, *Unpacking*, 4.

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Appendix 1: Gallery Installation of Examination Exhibition,
ANUSOAD Gallery.

Exhibition shown 2-11 March 2017.



Fig. 169. Installation View of *Eternal Spring* and *Season to Taste*



Fig. 170. *Season to Taste* (2015)

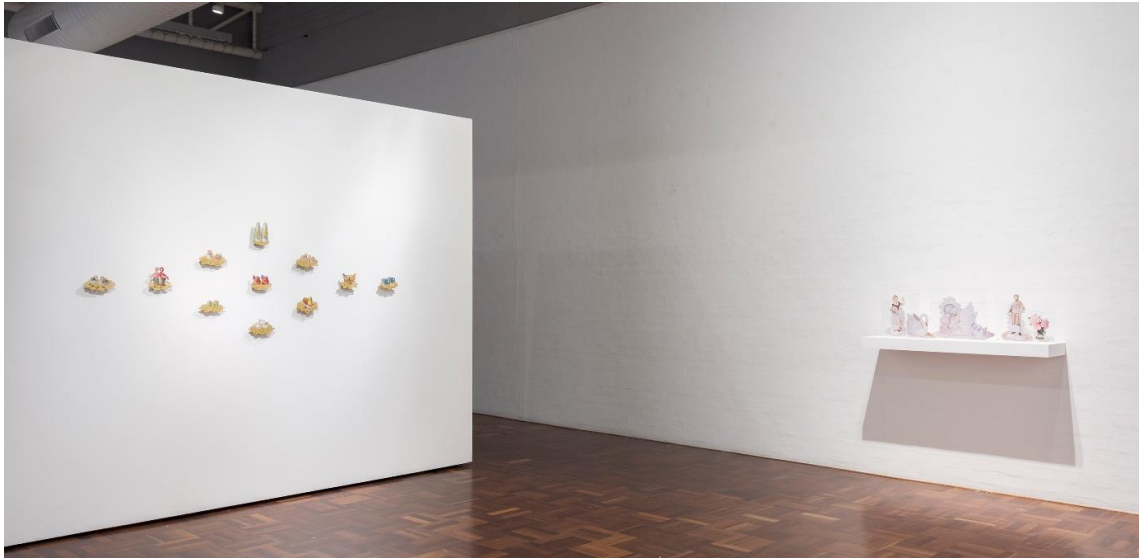


Fig. 171. Installation view of *Season to Taste* and *Tizzy Mantelpiece*



Fig. 172. *Tizzy Mantelpiece* (2015)



Fig. 173. Installation view of *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams and Scents of Nostalgia*



Fig. 174. *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* (2016)



Fig. 175. Installation view of *Tizzy Mantelpiece*, *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams* and *Scents of Nostalgia*



Fig. 176. *Scents of Nostalgia* (2016)



Fig. 177. Installation view of *Mike's Hawaiian Dreams, Scents of Nostalgia and Eternal Spring*



Fig. 178. *Eternal Spring* (2017)