

MAKING LISTENING SPACE

Naming is an act of identification. It is a linguistic device that focuses attention on complex and subtle relationships and may tease out unnamed or unnameable references, oblique or unconscious connections, or invisible, intangible meanings. Or it may just be stating the obvious.

The conventions of naming in art have become increasingly compelling as both cues and clues to production and reading of meaning. As the guise of art has recently assumed such a diverse and eclectic range of forms and strategies, the need to expand our reference points to help guide our understanding of the conceptual or theoretical foundations of new art is a vital part of recognizing value and meaning.

With no hint of afterthought, titles in Anne Graham's work have a powerful sense of agency, a capacity to provide immediate insight into the nature and content of the work, its relevance and resonance to the artistic project at hand, and significantly, its reach into the consciousness and even the unconsciousness of the viewer. While we are profoundly involved with the form the works take - their visuality, materiality, and the physicality of their location in space - the titles provide another kind of platform to explore motivations, intentionality, desired effects, and consequent meaning.

By considering the interconnections and coherence across variety of forms of artwork included in this exhibition it is evident that Anne Graham is subtly working both ends of the spectrum, operating on our senses through careful and precise knowledge of

object selection, the production of surface effects, and the chosen materials, as well as through subliminal, referential, and evocative interactions with these works. Graham is not hiding this duality, feinting, with sleight of hand illusions, to trick, conceal or obfuscate, rather she makes it central to her artistic practice and a key to her allusive project.

From the outset, her project is an appeal to the senses, and given the dramatic range of appeals available in art, from the dark and morbid to the exotic and fantastic and more, Graham's appeal is gentle, evocative, occasionally humorous, and delicately subtle.

The quiet disposition of the title of this exhibition could not be more evocative: *Whispering and Rustling, the Susurrus of People, Places, and Things*. Just as it could not provide a more specific albeit ambitious range of references for her primary concerns as an artist and, in Graham's case, as a person: 'People, Places, and Things'. The extensive reach of these three concerns is palpably tangible, grounded in real experience and may at first appear to gently lean towards the seeming equivalences proposed in object oriented ontology, where the human is not privileged and exists on the same plane as all other forms and structures of matter. But this would overlook the barely perceptible vibration, the amplitude of detectable humming that Graham proposes amongst people, places, and things that inexorably requires the receptor, the listener, hearing.

Graham reproduces this aural vibration in

her large scale, quasi-ceremonial sculpture, *Shinohara's House* (2009) involving a compilation of kitchen tools including glass funnels, woks, grinding wheels and bamboo spoons, to create a dry-fountain with flowing sand or, in this case, carborundum as a stand in for sand. The inventive reuse of familiar domestic equipment to construct the simplest of sound-making via a slow flow-rate apparatus elegantly reflects the operational logic of the kitchen, to combine simple and purified elements and materials into a refined and complex, and in some cases, amazingly sophisticated outcome. It also invites comparison with the social and ceremonial pleasures of a communal meal, along with possible vibrational conversations and cross-table exchanges.

The visceral intent and effect of Graham's work, its spatial and tactile sensitivity, activates and implies more senses than sight and is engaged with a broader set of strategies than an expressive exploration of perception and observation. The concerns of the artist are compellingly human, triggered by the intimacy of the personal, and self and other identification, and further conditioned by the spaces, places, and the environments we inhabit, and the observation and use of things, of objects and artefacts that spur imagination and possibility, and which may mundanely rest within our reach.

While the viewer is free to generalise to their situation and their level of understanding and identification, the people, places and things that emerge in Graham's work are located within her own orbit and within her frame of

reference. People she has met, in places she has been, with things she has used herself. She has studied her subjects. Engaged with them, their environments, and their material experience. Yet the specificity of her work is neither restrictive nor instructional, rather it is invitational, offering the possibility of correlation or pattern matching, encouraging the viewer to identify, to situate their experience within the concerns she addresses, and to permit their own imagination unfettered sway.

In this sense, the knowing sensibility of the artist remains generous and perceptively challenging, rather than confronting or conceptually onerous, and the nature of the 'susurrus' can be likened to a murmur, a kind of inarticulate, near sub-audible inference, neither entirely open nor entirely specific, nor closed or constrained in its meaning. In this way naming becomes a cue for possibility in an imaginary space and hints at deeper, less accessible resonances that cannot be entirely constrained by the act of naming.

There is also an unbridled sense of both feminine and feminist intent and impact in this compilation of work, in its range of form and content, its supple dislocations of scale, its inviting and sometimes startlingly disjunctive conjunction of materials, its subdued yet quietly captivating aural effects, and its clues to subjectivity through the premeditated intimacy of pivotal public/private exchanges and personal projections. The compelling and revelatory effects of rescaling in a deceptively simple sculpture like *Alice's Comb* (2001), with its doubled, reflected form and its glistening

translucency, suggest that the habit-formed invisibility of the everyday desire to conform, to beautify, to mirror constructed norms of the body as natural, is in fact a comforting, sensuous affectation.

In *Angels and Insects* (2005), Graham replaces parts of the worn and discarded tools with a new material; combining used and rusted farm implements with pristine, transparent handles of Perspex. At once the effect on these amended found objects is somewhat magical, not simply drawing attention to the deeply embedded record of work implied by the old, abandoned tools, but transforming them into somewhat delicate yet oversized instruments, complete with fragile, clear, crystal-like, pure diamond-esque perhaps, handles. The incongruence of this melded material is both confounding and compelling, a near improbable feat with dilapidated agricultural hand-tools. To display these functional assemblages, she simply leaves them accessible, lined up against the wall, expectantly ready for action, knowing though that recuperating these objects for farm or garden use is not even remotely possible.

Graham's social interests and research into the role of the textile industries on individual lives, particularly its dangerously oppressive impact on the lives of female workers, as well as understanding the impact of the finished article, the garment, on the individual, is a subject of ongoing investigation that avoids the plaintive voice often found in more didactic forms of social practice. Rather this is a set of concerns about labour and meaning, and the body, that permeate the production of other kinds of

imaginative objects, artefacts, or wearables in Graham's work, and which also harken back to her earlier explorations as a performance artist.

In an astonishing series of works that deal with clothing, cloaking, or covering, Graham undoes the concealing, self-delusive, dissembling project of dress and adornment in a disarming, humorous and refreshingly non-ironic manner. It is not that the work is straightforward or uncomplicated, far from it; the works' somewhat rustic, and conversely baroque, form emerges from the conflation of daring high-fashion design excess with the technical toll of the demanding, hand-made, original artefact. Several of the works are disturbingly amusing with a dark undercurrent of sexuality, pet-obsession, or camp excess. These works exist in various guises, as clothing, as fashion photographs, and as sources of portraiture, tell-tale representations of relationships of, say, self to pet, artist to subject, or subject to persona, and the myriad convolutions of mutual obligations and recognitions that can result through the explorations of these relations.

The translucent business suit, the subject's quizzical expression, and the fake modelling gesture of *Connor, in Haptic Interface* (2012) belies the morbid intentionality of suave sameness, so dominant in corporate culture, with a subversive, eccentric innocence that appears both surgically deliberate and diaphanously accidental at the same time. While Graham's suits and other coats and kimonos and her use of felting deliberately refer to Joseph Beuys' mystique-making belief in

the democratic possibilities of the interpolation of art and daily life, the personalized and referential nature of her choice of materials offers a more nuanced, and ultimately darker view of the complex relationship amongst the artist, the subject, the artefact, and the viewer.

In other portrait works, such as *Joni and Bacon* (2014) or *Julie and Cloud* (2014), or even *Chicken Man* (2016), Graham has explored her textile project further, making unique wearables from fabric crafted and woven or felted using the shearing or plucking of the model's pets, or domestic animals connected to the model. These works, comprised of craft, fashion, sculpture, performance, photography, and installation, are eerily amusing and satisfyingly whimsical. The culminating correlative images of the subjects, adorned in the outfits or costumes, or mask, manufactured from harvesting their own pet's hair or feathers, is no subsistence farming idyll, it is much too disturbing for that kind of lyrical playfulness. Rather it suggests a kind of contemporary emblematic narcissism, a not-so-deep desire for self-affirmation through identification, an assertion of self through the bonds with other, and a sense of control and power and self-confidence through possession and ownership. Not really picture perfect moments. 'Julie' looks strained and tense, on edge, and 'Cloud' seems very ready to be elsewhere. Chicken man, only his eyes visible, intent, seems trapped by his decorative full-faced, feather helmet/head, an expressionless individual resigned to his extravagantly adorning mutations. In these highly vocative photographs and unique exotic coats and mask, Graham, provides us with an

unselfconscious glimpse, and no more, into the dormant conditions of exchange that construct and constrain identity through relationships, desire, and power. As a bonus, these images seem so harmlessly amusing while still suggesting underlying mordant possibilities.

Graham's intent in the presentation of *Whispering and Rustling* is more than a compilation of selected work; it is a reconfigured narrative, a space for refining and renewing the discourse both within and about her work. Since its inception, the curatorial project has been subject to the need, and desire, to generate a visual and spatial syntax that both displays coherence and reveals and embellishes meaning through intelligent and insightful juxtaposition. All art is conditioned by space and time – the space of display and the time spent with the work. While many exhibition projects compress time, driving the pace of change through a montage of encounters and rapid inversions, other curatorial projects attempt to slow time down, to allow for a more reflective and mediative engagement with the work. The exhibition space, the clarifying, if daunting space of the white cube, is a dual purpose operation, serving the public with direct access to a finished artwork, and serving the artist/curator as an experimental space to refine and adjust the visual language of art/exhibition experience, and a temporary reckoning of the work. In both cases the exhibition most often freezes time, as the artwork enters a moment of stasis within this place, for this period of time. Each new exhibition, each new formation, each new installation, is an experiment, an investigation

into the capacity of art to reform itself, to remake itself, through the self-conscious artistic/curatorial effects of the development and accretion of meaning in a new project.

In the way this exhibition has been conceived and produced, the works selected, edited, or reconfigured Graham has elaborated notions and power of ritual and ceremony, a codified suite of behaviours and accoutrements that provide insight and meaning to experience, and often accrue responsibility, control, or authority. Much of this work suggests a focus on elusive moments of clarity, catches of recognition that provide insight and connection, a sense of identification. Graham's work is concise and intent, but unobtrusively so, because of its subtlety and sensuality. It is enticing and encourages reflection, self-reflection. It is precisely ordered towards providing stillness, a listening space, and time, to extend those fragile moments, to make them more of a reality.

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