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# Object Shift

02 August 2014



## What a burden lies on the objects of the still life!<sup>1</sup>

PREVIOUS PAGE:

**Georgie Hill**

*Back to Back (Eileen Gray Non Conformist Chair  
with Ruhlmann Defenses Chair), detail, 2013*

watercolour and graphite on paper

397 × 330mm



**Graham Fletcher**  
*Untitled (Sugar Loaf Waka)*, 2013  
oil on canvas, 1500 × 1200mm



**Graham Fletcher**  
*Untitled (Lounge Room Tribalism)*, 2010  
oil on canvas, 1500 × 1200mm

In *Stilleben*, a 1997 documentary by German filmmaker Harun Farocki, still life paintings by sixteenth and seventeenth century Flemish painters are compared to advertisements photographed in the 1990s. In a series of narrated vignettes, Farocki's camera alternates between images of the painted canvases to footage taken in a studio, where advertisements for cheese, beer glasses and an expensive watch are being made. Through these pairings, Farocki suggests that there is more than a resemblance between traditional still life painting and modern advertising. Both genres of 'still life' involve a complex and knowing construction of the depicted objects. In one studio setting, beer glasses are placed, after careful measurement, in a cluster of three, with a single glass poised above the grouping. Once the perfect tilt of the glass has been determined, a measure of beer is poured, and the photographer captures that fleeting moment when the foam rises to the top of the rim and bubbles effervesce. The final image evokes a product, a brand, a lifestyle. This is achieved not simply through the representation of a glass of foam-topped fizzing beer, but rather through the choreographed interplay between the object's expected function, its relationship to other objects and its placement in a wider context created by the assembly of the display.

*Object Shift* brings together two-dimensional work by artists Kushana Bush, Elaine Campaner, Graham Fletcher, Georgie Hill, Marian Maguire and Neil Pardington with the intention of inviting viewers to consider the multiple meanings generated by objects. Much like *Stilleben*, *Object Shift* suggests that objects are understood through their relationships with the things and environment that surround them. Photographers Elaine Campaner and Neil Pardington focus on objects that exist in private or public collections. Iconic twentieth century furniture designs, though perhaps not immediately evident as such, are referenced in Georgie Hill's watercolours. The vessels in Kushana Bush's and Marian Maguire's works, as well as the eclectic array of domestic furnishings in Graham Fletcher's paintings, present imagined and synthesised objects based upon different classes of historically and geographically specific designs. Though this selection offers a spectrum of real or invented forms, what the works share in common is that they each present, document or stage objects away from their expected contexts and position them within unfamiliar — and at times fictional — environments. Columnist Ina Hughs once stated, "Objects are stories solidified"<sup>2</sup>; this exhibition explores the way in which objects placed in new juxtapositions and foreign contexts cause us to rethink the story, to reassess the ascribed function or meaning of objects we might ordinarily take for granted.

The desire to find new stories for objects finds sympathy with the agenda of surrealist artists, writers and intellectuals. In particular, writer and collector André Breton believed that by pluralising the contexts in which objects were encountered, the notion of an object's 'solidity' would be challenged. In her examination of post-modern theory, cultural theorist Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth considers how plurality was understood by surrealists to throw the very materiality of objects into question. Her explanation is worth quoting in full:

This estrangement of objects from their 'normal' order calls attention to that order *and* to its arbitrariness. The final consequence of this estrangement is the disappearance of what we once took to be 'the object' into a function of the systems in which it appears. As it appears simultaneously in *multiple* systems, 'the object' is in crisis because its solid identity can no longer be established. One cannot resort to the crude proof of kicking the stone to verify its presence because we are not talking about an exclusively material world but rather a world of cultural formations where all objects are given identity. The surreal fact is that alternatives exist, and alternatives of the most fundamental kind.<sup>3</sup>

The possibilities of painting, photography and printmaking are relevant here. Because of their ability to frame unusual perspectives and defy the limits of reality, representations of objects can provide these alternative encounters. Speaking of his practice, artist Graham Fletcher notes, "the medium of painting offered me the freedom and immediacy to create imaginative combinations within a borderland world"<sup>4</sup>. In a similar manner, each of the works in *Object Shift* offer perspectives that transcend the possibilities of everyday life. Conjuring any number and manner of things, these works act as portals to new constellations of objects: they can take us behind closed doors and into imagined worlds.



**Neil Pardington**  
*Taonga Maori Store #2, Whanganui*  
Regional Museum, 2006  
LED / C-Print, 1500 x 1200 mm



**Neil Pardington**  
*Polynesian Spear Storage,*  
*Otago Museum, 2008*  
LED and C-Print, 1200 × 1500 mm





**Georgie Hill**  
*Face to Face (Ruhlmann Chair with  
 Eileen Gray S-Bend Chair), 2013*  
 watercolour and graphite on paper, 312×386mm



**Georgie Hill**  
*Back to Back (Eileen Gray Non Conformist Chair  
 with Ruhlmann Defenses Chair), 2013*  
 watercolour and graphite on paper, 397×330mm



**Kushana Bush**  
*The Throat of Summer, 2011*  
gouache and pencil on paper  
760 x 1690mm

Neil Pardington's photographs give viewers a rare glimpse into the collections held beyond public access in gallery, archive and museum storage spaces around New Zealand. His two works in *Object Shift* look at groupings of carved Pacific spears and Māori tekoteko and kōruru — carved images of ancestors — which have been fastened onto walls. The view of these interior storage spaces raise interesting questions about what it means to collect and store objects. Divorced from use, these Pacific and Māori carvings gain something of an autobiographical purpose. Seen through the eyes of a non-Pacific and non-Māori culture, these spears and taonga are no longer living or functional but are instead categorised and stored; items that play a small role in a greater project of knowledge production and cultural preservation. Deemed important enough to acquire and safeguard, these spears and taonga have nevertheless paradoxically been both reclassified and relegated to a realm of indefinite exclusion. In these storage spaces, their status as treasure and castoff, taonga and specimen, vacillates.

The spaces beyond those dedicated to public display proves a fertile ground for exploring the different lives objects can lead. In particular, the domestic realm emerges as space in which the relationships between objects are continuously reconfigured. Indeed, as an expressive sanctuary, the home perhaps offers the most freedom for individuals to organise 'their world' through objects as frequently as desired and in the most extreme ways. Graham Fletcher imagines the re-location of ethnographic objects into hyper-affluent homes modelled on interiors of the 1950s and 1960s, largely based on images found in architectural journals, magazines and design books. In two exhibited works, Fletcher considers how domestic spaces can facilitate material encounters between Western and non-Western cultures, and how this complex negotiation constructs whole new worlds.<sup>5</sup> In *Untitled* (Lounge Room Tribalism), for instance, a bright room is densely packed with a disparate array of things. Floral-patterned armchairs, pink curtains, packed bookshelves and retro entertainment devices are just a few of the furnishing that fill the room. Subsumed into this eclectic array of textures, colours and collectables are three greenstone mere and the busts of two non-European figures.<sup>6</sup> Here, these objects 'plundered' from the Pacific are transformed and domesticated by their residence in these homes into mute ornaments.

In Georgie Hill's watercolours, the furniture designs of modernist architect and designer Eileen Gray (1878–1976) are paired with designs by her male contemporaries Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (1879–1933). Gray worked primarily as a lacquer artist, furniture designer and architect. Following the exhibition of her architectural projects in Le Corbusier's *Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux* in 1937, Gray's name faded quietly away until the late 1960s, when her career was the focus of an article in *Domus* magazine. Though several reassessments of Gray's practice have been published since then, it is really only since the late twentieth century that her status as a modernist design legend has gained momentum.

The intermingling of different furniture designs in Hill's watercolours destabilises any easy readings of design hierarchies. This narrative ambiguity is enhanced through Hill's deft use of pattern as a camouflaging device. Often gendered and associated with superfluous decoration, pattern is here used to create optical uncertainty: dominating surface patterns both sit above and permeate the furniture forms. It is not until you are close to the work that you can decipher the iconic designs. Even then, like an ambiguous pattern, it feels impossible to hold in the mind's eye all of the distinct forms and shapes at once. In *Feint*, a 2014 publication about Hill's work, curator Aaron Lister describes the effects as one where "objects seem to emerge, dissolve and return within the space of a few seconds".<sup>7</sup>

A different form of ambiguity is encountered in Kushana Bush's *The Throat of Summer*. This triptych presents three clusters of people each reaching for ceramics and holding bouquets of flowers close to their chests. The first two groups cluster over blue and white vases while the third group gather behind a loose diagonal line of terracotta pot plants. In the catalogue *All Things to All Men*, writer Natalie Poland states, "Bush is aware of how the meaning or significance of an object is contingent on its historical and geographical location".<sup>8</sup> Here, however, objects are stripped away from any clear historical or geographical setting. The pale grey backdrop offers no window view into the outside world. Instead, the unadorned space invites viewers to constitute their own meaning from the configuration of poses, figures and expressions.



**Elaine Campaner**  
*Tweed Heads from Razorback*, 2014  
 pure pigment digital print on 100% cotton  
 archival paper, 353 × 530mm



**Elaine Campaner**  
*Travelling North (inclement)*, 2009  
 Pure pigment digital print on 100% cotton  
 archival paper, 353 × 530mm



**Elaine Campaner**  
*St Francis (a bird)*, 2009  
 pure pigment digital print on 100% cotton  
 archival paper, 553 × 830 mm



**Elaine Campaner**  
*Early Interception*, 2007 and 2011  
 pure pigment digital print on 100% cotton  
 archival paper, 553 × 830mm



**Marian Maguire**  
*Aphrodite prepares to Introduce Herself to Yet Another of Rangī and Papa's Sons,*  
 2011 etching, 310 × 222mm



**Marian Maguire**  
*Forest Encounter on a Belly Amphora*  
*Satyr and Antipodean Maenad,* 2010  
 etching, 275 × 218mm



**Marian Maguire**  
*Atlas assists Tane in Maintaining the Separation between Rangī and Papa,* 2010  
 etching, 262 × 277mm



**Marian Maguire**  
*Gustav von Tempsky & Lucy Takiora seek a Moment's Respite from a Hard Day's Scouting,* 2011 and 2012  
 etching, 296 × 209mm



**Marian Maguire**  
*Socrates and Titokowaru, with the Reverend Thomas Kendall in attendance, discuss the True Nature of Love,* 2011  
 etching, 222 × 301mm

Elaine Campaner offers a different take on vessels — as well as other objects that are intended to travel. In each of these five images, Campaner considers the narratives evoked through the surface designs of mass produced objects, particularly souvenirs. By manipulating the scale of these objects, she transforms their illustrations into landscape backdrops for staged scenes: a teaspoon becomes a lighthouse at the edge of a cliff just as a collection of mugs becomes the forest a tiny toy-man walks through. Viewers are here prompted to look ‘through’ the object to the scenery they replicate. The pleasing tromp l’oeil effect belies Campaner’s deeper interest in redeeming these objects from their ordinary function as commoditized keepsakes associated with touristic experiences.

The surfaces of objects are also of interest to printmaker Marian Maguire. Each of her imaginatively playful etchings employs the forms and decorative narratives associated with Greek vases to merge antipodean histories. Distinct in this body of work is a particular focus on the meeting of genders as an amplifier to the cross-cultural encounter. Satyrs, gods, and historical figures from nineteenth century colonial history meet in provocative couplings, suggesting something of a universal continuum and human connection across cultures and eras. By confronting our expectations of how these characters should behave, Maguire offers a more complex, humanistic reading of history. The inscription of these imagined narratives on recognisably ‘Greek’ vases can also be read as pointing to the role of objects in framing particular narratives or viewpoints. Like Neil Pardington’s photographs, these works undermine naturalised readings of objects often historicised in museum settings.

In uprooting objects from their anticipated environments and locating them in new spaces, these six artists reject unambiguous interpretations of objects in favour of opening up multiple readings. What are we to make of ethnographic artefacts in suburban homes? Why exactly are mysterious figures fawning over ceramics? Though they exist fixed on paper or canvas, the objects in each of these works are hardly still. As things shift from space onto canvas and paper, the contexts in which we encounter them expand, re-fashioning stories and provoking strange encounters with what might perhaps have been familiar. It is in these two-dimensional contexts, these in-between spaces, that assumptions about objects can be challenged and alternative identities realised. The assuredness of where objects belong, or what they mean, is anything but solid.

1. Harun Farocki, ‘Stilleben’, 2007, <http://www.documenta12.de/archiv/dx/english/news/films/f-still.htm>, accessed 20 May 2014.
2. Ina Hughs, ‘Objects are stories solidified’, 2013, <http://www.knoxnews.com/news/2013/apr/27/ina-hughs-objects-are-stories-solidified/>, accessed 20 May 2014.
3. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 94.
4. Graham Fletcher, ‘Lounge Room Tribalism’ in *Lounge Room Tribalism*, Auckland: Mangere Arts Centre, 2012, p. 17.
5. Ibid, p. 10.
6. Linda Tyler, ‘From the collection’, <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/creative/about/art-collection-and-galleries/university-art-collection/Graham%20Fletcher,%20Lounge%20Room%20Tribalism.%202010.pdf>, accessed 20 May 2013.
7. Aaron Lister, ‘Ripolin’ in *Feint*, Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 2014, p. 12.
8. Natalie Poland, ‘Home and Away: Travel, Place and The Cosmopolitan Art of Kushana Bush’ in *All Things To All Men*, Otago: Hocken Collections, University of Otago, 2012, p. 6.

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