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Christian Thompson

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Exhibition Review

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Located amongst the rows of terraced Victorian homes in the jacaranda-lined streets of Sydney's Paddington, the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation occupies a far different atmosphere to the city's often photographed harbor. The latter now sees cruise ships dock outside the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, obliterating views of the iconic Sydney Opera House. Heated debates about public funding for the arts continue in the city, including plans to relocate the Powerhouse Museum from its central Ultimo site to the suburb of Parramatta—a location arguably more deserving of a locally relevant cultural center than a decanted version of the Powerhouse and its collection's emphasis on applied arts and sciences. With the Australian political climate now echoed by Britain's vote to leave the European Union and the presidential election of Donald Trump in the United States, business-run politics with at times a blatant ideology of anti-immigration are alarming but unavoidable facts facing the arts across a number of countries.

Established in April 2008, the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF) has offered a different

model of patronage. Initially a commercial gallery (Sherman Galleries operated from 1986–2007), Chairman and Executive Director Dr Gene Sherman conceived of the current incarnation as an independent not-for-profit initiative underwritten by her family's private finances “to champion research, education and exhibitions of significant and innovative contemporary art primarily from Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East.” Since their arrival in Australia from South Africa in 1976, Gene Sherman and her husband have amassed a considerable private collection of contemporary art. Citing a desire to undertake projects at a more considered pace than previously possible as a commercial gallery, SCAF is a necessary alternative model for the arts today: global in outlook but privately funded. Some of the Foundation's values can be seen in their choice of inaugural exhibition in 2008 with the Chinese artist and political dissident Ai Weiwei—now a household name—or the Japanese architect Shigeru Ban, who the Foundation's website recently announced will “represent SCAF's final project before evolving into a new contemporary centre for ideas and culture.”

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Figure 1

Collection+: Christian Thompson. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2015. Photo: silversalt photography.

First introduced in May 2013, SCAF's *Collection+* series are described by the Director as “vignette exhibitions” curated by invited established, as well as emerging, individuals (Figure 1). The global reach of the series is evident in the selected artists: Chiharu Shiota (Japan), Sopheap Pich (Cambodia), Pinaree Sanpitak (Thailand), and Shaun Gladwell (Australia). Christian Thompson is the fifth artist and the first Indigenous Australian. Gene Sherman describes the remit of *Collection+* as posing particular curatorial challenges that require the “widest possible research whilst simultaneously demanding succinct thinking and highly disciplined editing. My hope is that the

initial impetus for the series—offering a glimpse of our almost half-century of contemporary collecting—has, in addition to this primary goal, encouraged curatorial discipline and innovation.”

Each curator has worked to the same brief based on an invitation to “select a single artist and a limited number of works from the Gene & Brian Sherman Collection—with their ultimate goal the exploration of other collections worldwide marked by an interest in the same artist.” While the *Collection+* focus of an artist held in the couple's private collection could have run the danger of seeming self-serving, the exhibition series is framed by an “interest

in public and private collecting patterns” and represents one of several distinct exhibition strategies undertaken by the Foundation.

Gene Sherman refers to a personal interest in fashion in her introduction to the exhibition catalog: “What drew me to Thompson's practice? My strong and longstanding passion for fashion meshes with the artist's deeply thought-through costume play.” Sherman's dedication to contemporary Japanese fashion in particular resulted in a formal donation of over 60 garments and accessories to the Powerhouse Museum in 2009, celebrated in the exhibition *Contemporary Japanese Fashion: the Gene Sherman Collection* (28



Figure 2

Collection+: Christian Thompson. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2015. Photo: silversalt photography.

February 2009–26 January 2010). In conversation with curator Dr Claire Roberts in late 2008, she explained her disciplined wardrobe edit of approximately 20 garments and “a policy of if I acquired, I retired something.” Worn much like the gallery worker’s uniform American artist Andrea Zittel proposed with her *AZ Uniform Project*, Sherman’s wardrobe demands are aesthetic and intellectual, but also highly practical. Admittedly Zittel was, at the time, seeking economy in her solution to her gallery work garb, while Sherman now patronizes the collectable. However, both women share a desire to save time for more interesting labors.

SCAF Project 29, *Christian Thompson*, was curated by Alana Kushnir, a practicing lawyer and graduate of the MFA in Curating at Goldsmiths College, London. Thompson’s breadth of practice spans photography, performance, video, sculpture, and sound, here benefiting from Kushnir’s succinct editing and the gallery’s particularly effective exhibition display. Perhaps of greatest interest to textile scholarship are three machine knit sweaters, each with awkwardly oversized arms, which Thompson commissioned a commercial knitter to produce in the early 2000s (Figure 2). The three works are based on a pattern book that, Kushnir explains, hails from the

artist’s personal collection of “mis-representational kitsch” relating to Aboriginal people.

Ayers Rock jumper (2002) is displayed on a clothing hanger with arms spread wide, suggesting the silhouette of the famous and contested sandstone land formation in central Australia (Figure 3). (The Aboriginal peoples see Uluru as sacred and have requested that tourists do not climb the site, a request that to date continues to be ignored by some visitors.) To the right, *Tiwi jumper* (2002) hangs high on the gallery wall, with great drooping arms and patterning that suggests the highly collectable abstract decorative paintings of



Figure 3

Ayers Rock Jumper, 2002. Textile. 85 mc (center back length), 480 cm (sleeve length). Collection of the artist. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2015. Photo: silversalt photography.

the Indigenous peoples which are the sweater's namesake. Nearby *Kangaroo and Boomerang jumper* (2002) is displayed inside a vitrine, overlong knitted sleeves piled on a low plinth base.

Three photographs of Marcia Langton, a friend of the artist and Indigenous Australian activist and scholar, picture her first wearing *Kangaroo and Boomerang jumper* and then in a pair of portraits wearing *Tiwi jumper*, over length arms drooped onto the floor (Figure 4). Or as Alison Kubler and Oakley Smith in their catalog essay see "a contemporary willingness to not only embrace the now-daggy past, as Langton

physically does with Thompson's knitted jumper in one image, but reclaim the spirituality of these symbolic animals and motifs within Aboriginal culture for himself." As with the display of each jumper, Kushnir explains that curatorial decisions about the framing of the images were intended to communicate the artwork's differing ownership.

Keeping a culture at arm's length, or as the exhibition catalog refers to Australia, a nation "made off the sheep's back," are easy readings of these beguiling works. The *Ayers Rock jumper* and *Tiwi jumper* share a generic palette of beige, sand, brown, and blue while *Kangaroo*

and *Boomerang jumper* depicts just what the name describes, but is made of 98% acrylic and 2% wool. The fiber content smacks of tokenism authenticity—almost entirely but not quite synthetic. If we are to read this as culture "made off the sheep's back" then simulacra has taken up a majority position in the mix, and that acrylic is more likely than not an import.

Also exhibited are photographs which the catalog text describes as "conceptual portraiture in which [Thompson] inhabits a range of culturally charged personas, achieved through handcrafted costumes, choreographed poses



Figure 4

Collection+: Christian Thompson. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2015. Photo: silversalt photography.

and orchestrated settings,” alongside several video works that use Thompson’s father’s language of the Bidjara people (Figure 5).

This multidisciplinary range of practice may be explained in part by Thompson’s education, beginning in Australia with a BFA from the University of Southern Queensland followed by a MFA (Sculpture) and Honours (Sculpture) from RMIT University, Melbourne. More than a decade overseas has followed, including a Master of Theatre from DasArts, Amsterdam School of Arts and most recently a PhD (Fine Art) from Trinity College, University of Oxford.

The press has made much of the artist’s identity as one of few

Aboriginal Australians to have studied at the University of Oxford in its 900-year history, but perhaps more interesting to consider is the influence this extended and concerted education has made on Thompson’s work. In his interview with Kushnir included in the catalog text, Thompson refers to his 2013 crystal-like black resin sculpture *He’s Learning the Language* (similar to *All Revolutions are Led by the Young* included in the SCAF exhibition), explaining that “the title does ring true with these ideas of learning artistic language and academic language, but also allowing the form to speak for itself. For me it is a union of male and female but it is

also so evocative of my childhood in the outback desert of Queensland. The crystal forms are Australian—they are beautiful in their own formal sculptural sensibility and are biographical as well” (Figure 6).

In his photographic portraiture portions of the artist’s face are often obscured through props: eucalyptus leaves conceal his head and eyes, that nonetheless look toward the camera, torso donned in 1980s kitsch cowl neck sweater, lips parted and lightly glossed, prim pearl stud earring visible, in *Untitled (Blue Gum)* (2007); a veil conceals that artist’s downward looking face made of strings of faux pearl beads, urban hoodly recast in 1960s floral pink in



Figure 5

Collection+: Christian Thompson. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2015. Photo: silversalt photography.

Untitled from the *King Billy* series (2010) (Figure 7). In the five editions displayed in alternating black and white frames of *Forgiveness of Land* (2012), the artist stares into the camera lens wearing a red, white, and blue printed head scarf tied demurely under the chin—a hybrid of the British Queen on horseback and a 1950s housewife—but with the artist’s eyes obscured by a collage of crystalline forms. Is this the Queen seeing today’s Commonwealth nations through quartz tinted glasses?

Surprising many, Australia’s 1999 vote to leave the Commonwealth resulted in “no”; New Zealand’s recent referendum

to replace the national flag, which contains the Union Jack, was an expensive “no” vote in March of 2016. Or is a more biographical reading of the crystalline structures fair, one Thompson connects to his own childhood? The visible parts of the printed headscarf in *Forgiveness of Land* suggest the style of abstract dot paintings associated with Indigenous Australian art and not infrequently subject to accusations of cultural appropriation. The exhibition catalog recounts a recent example involving the American siblings Kate and Laura Mulleavy whose fashion label Rodarte included in their autumn/winter 2012 collection imagery originally

created by the late Papunya Tula artist Benny Tjangala that was licensed by not publically credited.

Kubler and Smith cite a controversially sympathetic opinion piece Thompson penned about the debate for the July/August 2012 issue of *(Inside) Interior Design Review* in which he wrote, “I contend that these types of consensual collaborations are essential in gaining autonomous recognition and financial independence while also working to transcend the polarization of the complex multicultural face of modern Aboriginal Australia. Tjangala’s work defies attempts to be drawn into provincial arguments about ownership and returns our art back to its rightful



Figure 6

Collection+: Christian Thompson. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2015. Photo: silversalt photography.

place—as a revered and influential form of contemporary art production.”

Forgiveness of Land is the lynchpin of this exhibition, providing the starting point, as the *Collection+* exhibition series at SCAF obliges, for Kushnir’s curation: edition 10/10 comes from the Sherman’s private collection with

further editions on loan from private and public collections, including one artist-owned edition. Thompson undertook this recent work during his PhD candidacy, which fortuitously coincided with the Australian Research Council (ARC) *We Bury Our Own* project that considers the repatriation of nineteenth-century

Australian photographs currently held in European collections including Thompson’s archival source: the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Collection+Christian Thompson presents thought-provoking questions for Australian and global audiences. The complexities of multiculturalism and the legacy of Britain’s colonial era



Figure 7

Untitled from the *King Billy* series, 2010. C-type print. 100 x 100 cm. Edition 1/10. Collection: Campbell Thomson, Melbourne. Installation view, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2015. Photo: silversalt photography.

are palpable, but so too are personal and even commercial debates about culture and value. Unlike Kubler and Smith I am not at all sure reclamation

is a possible, or even a desirable, outcome. But Thompson's ability to present a provocative sense of uncertainty about his personal

identity—and by extension our world today—tests our collective visual memories without allowing for oversimplified answers.

