

Rainbow Eaters

Group exhibition featuring Nick Selenitch, Kirra Jamison, Paul Yore & Valentina Palonen

Curated by Mitchel Brannan

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“Colour threatens – or promises – to undo all the hard-won achievements of culture. It threatens – or promises – chaos and irregularity. Colour threatens disorder – but also promises liberty.”[1]

Rainbow Eaters brings together the work of four contemporary artists who use emphatic and flamboyant combinations of colour to create talismanic imagery. In their use of rhythmic and repetitious making practices, each artist has a sense of ritual in their work, compiling colour into discordant and lurid arrangements, and it is through this process that they explore intuitive, mystical and sensorial understandings of the world.

The exhibition is predicated on two interrelated interests that have recently gained traction within contemporary art around the country. A burgeoning interest in the aesthetics of neo-shamanism and other forms of mysticism, manifest in some fine art and increasingly within popular culture, informs the premise of the show, as does the recent use by some artists of bright, jarring and psychedelic colours. Exhibitions around the country over the last twelve months have articulated this dual interest in different ways. New Psychedelia at the University of Queensland Art Museum acknowledged a trend amongst some contemporary Australian artists to reference the visual tropes of 60's psychedelia – swirling arrangements of rainbow colours that speak of metaphysical or spiritual experience. The exhibition Pagan Pop at Canberra Contemporary Art Space explored the recent interest in pagan and neo-shamanic aesthetic sensibilities. A dominant theme of that show was the acknowledgement of the artists of the ways in which these sensibilities have, in some ways, been co-opted by commercial and mainstream interests. While these concerns inform the premise of Rainbow Eaters, the idea of the talisman is also central to work in this show – that an object, created through obsessive and ritualistic making practices, might be imbued with a sense of mystical or spiritual potency. It is proposed that perhaps it is the sensual and enigmatic nature of colour that often leads these artists to favour intuitive and ritualized practices over academicism and cynicism.

British artist David Batchelor, in his 2000 book *Chromophobia*, argues that a long-standing and insidious aversion to colour is evident throughout much of the history of Western thought, which he defines as the eponymous ‘Chromophobia’. One aspect of this aversion, he argues, is largely based on the association of colour with the exotic, the Oriental, the queer, the primitive – colour, put simply, has often landed on the wrong side of Descartes’ duality of the physical and metaphysical,

and has thus been routinely regarded as "... other to the higher values of Western culture." [2] The work of the artists in this exhibition is perhaps best characterized, then, by the opposite of Chromophobia – Chromophilia. For the chromophiliac, the otherness and exoticism of colour is not ignored or reviled; this is in fact, precisely its appeal. Colour can offer "a glimpse of the 'Other World', a world beyond Nature and the Law, a world undimmed by language, concepts, meanings and uses." [3] It is understandable then that an interest in lurid, psychedelic colour often comes coupled with an exploration of mysticism, spirituality and the occult; or perhaps that an exploration of the mystical is often performed through colour. In *Rainbow Eaters* these two concerns are intimately entwined.

In her sculptural work, Valentina Palonen enacts ritual by casting. Though the act of casting is itself inherently ritualistic, Palonen often subjects her casts to further ritualized practices. In recent work the artist reverentially returns the original pieces (rocks, sticks, shells) to the natural environments from which they were sourced. Many of her cast objects are also wrapped in ribbon before being wall mounted – like the upturned horseshoe, the piece is given the quality of a charm, a protective talisman. The sculpture, *Virvon, Varvon*, a large tree branch wrapped in skeins of multi-coloured ribbon and adorned with resin casts, is an extension of this practice. Through a ritualistic mummification of her object in rainbow hues, referencing Finnish Easter traditions, the artist gives the otherwise banal branch a sense of magical significance. Overtly synthetic casts of vegetables, shells and stones are affixed to the branch, and a shrine of sorts is created where natural objects are rendered magical and sacred through an infusion of plastic, rainbow colours.

The work of Nick Selenitsch has often implicitly explored the relationship of colour and culture. In his series *Psychic Income*, of which three drawings are presented here, currency symbols from around the world are drawn in concentric circles. Each symbol bleeds and ebbs into others in vibrations of lurid colour; Dollars, Yen, Euros and pounds, through repetition and pattern, begin to lose their symbolic potency and start to assimilate into an optically vibrating circular talisman. The use of colour in these works is the undoing of symbolism, where the vibrancy of Selenitsch's concentric rings visually disturbs and begins to break down – to corrode – the legibility, and authority, of his content. Here the intuitive, sensory experience of colour works in stark opposition to, and begins to undo, the definitive rationalism of modern economics. By playfully questioning the interrelation of spirituality and economics (of intuition and rationality), these works posit mysticism and unknowability as valid frameworks for engaging with the world.

Kirra Jamison's work, *Surrender Star IV*, also utilizes the circular motif, but here it is rendered in delicate threads of rainbow colours. The artist laboriously compiles fragments of opaque gouache and vinyl, slowly constructing the complex network of her talismanic web. Colours are laid down intuitively as the work develops, the colour of each fragment informed by its neighbour, and this process is continued until the web is complete. The curved and straight threads of colour and circular composition are reminiscent of a dream-catcher, and this connotation is more than a purely formal one. Jamison's colour-wheel becomes, by virtue of the artist's obsessive colouring, a kind of magical charm – to protect, dazzle or perhaps, like the gossamer threads of the spider's web, to ensnare. While Batchelor elaborates on the notion of colour as an intoxicant that undoes the logic and rationality of language and culture, Jamison here links this connotation with the magical, the

mythical, and the talismanic. Here colour is a mythical portal, a cryptic symbol writ in vibrant hues that could be a map to Batchelor's 'Other World'.

Obsessively gathering, compiling, hybridizing, bastardizing and cannibalizing consumer detritus, Paul Yore constructs shrines from the synthetic hyper-colour and lurid noise of capitalism. Gaudy, kitsch and saturated in fragmented imagery, the artist's installations mimic the attention-grabbing chromatic strategies of advertising and popular culture, but their fecundity transforms them into something wholly different. In *Blessed Be Bieber*, the collection of capitalist detritus is presented as a site of devotion, an altar to that most plastic, manufactured and gaudy of consumer products, Canadian pop star Justin Bieber. The piece is a plastic ecosystem which seethes with life – far from judging or mocking the subject of his shrine, however, Yore acts as a genuinely curious bower-bird observing and gathering profusions of colourful stuff into mystical, living nests.

All of the artists in *Rainbow Eaters* use colour to invoke the unknowable. Colour eludes rational categorization, and in doing so it gives access to a sensorial, intuitive understanding of the world. In creating their polychromatic agglomerations, the artists explore the possibility of colour as a gateway – a portal to a world that defies rationalism and logic and embraces the primal, the intuitive and the magical.

[1] David Batchelor *Chromophobia* London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p.65.

[2] *Ibid*, p.23.

[3] *Ibid*, p.75.

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