

Doubles & Trebles

Emily Hartley-Skudder and Hamish Coleman

24 Mar - 11 Apr, 2017

Opening preview: Thur 23 Mar, 5 - 7pm

Artist talk: Thur 23 Mar, 4pm

The gamble

by Ellie Lee-Duncan (2017)

*'Art, in the traditional realm, is a commodity
that must pretend to universality.'*

Douglas Davis¹

The fine exactitude of the minutely rendered paint in Hartley-Skudder's works, and the luscious, buttery flatness of Coleman's abstraction play off each other in a morphing of colour and detail in *Doubles and Trebles*. Their joint exhibition at Ramp Gallery, Hamilton, has an overwhelming visual splendour—the predominant colours of vaporwave turquoise and synthetic grape purple tie each work together and create a lurid experience of artificiality, heightened by the spotlights surrounding the works, and the sharply delineated plastic surfaces depicted within the works themselves.

Hartley-Skudder and Coleman's works demonstrate their exacting, technical skill throughout the exhibition. Hartley-Skudder's painted miniature plastic objects have a high degree of realism. Coleman's hand-formed canvases are a skill in their manipulation of the material, and in the lavish layers of painted abstract colour create luminous, unyielding surfaces which complement the seeming simplicity of Hartley-Skudder's objects. The exhibition was conceived and created collaboratively in a shared studio space; it is an artistic and creative dialogue.

Plinth appears as its namesake: a delicate still life atop a rectangular plinth. There are several elements at play here—namely that it appears to display a painting, but the plinth itself is the work. The exposed vertical planes are the rich taupe of the linen canvas, and take on a lavender hue in response to the metallic purple of the top surface. On this, there appears to be a circle of white with a smattering of objects placed on it. On closer inspection, these realistic objects are painted, as is the white paper circle they rest on. A painted fold, a line of shadow on the 'paper' is the final flourish. One of the objects is a small white

plastic nail—of course, too fragile to nail anything. This playful inclusion alludes to the art historical tradition of trompe-l'œil which intends to create the optical illusion which exists beyond the picture plane. In previous works of this genre, many artists have employed the technique of painting a nail above the image, appearing to secure the work to the wall behind. Here, the nail lies to the side—a quiet nod to this tradition, which reappears in several other works in the exhibition.

Primarily considered a tool intended to display precious objects and artworks, the plinth itself further warps the rules of art history. Rosalind Krauss, in 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', argues that the plinth creates a site of removal from the physical space of the gallery and instead renders an artwork placeless; this pedestal is a mere tool in the creation of the artistic ideal.² But this pillar displays the painting on the top, while being itself an art object—the tool of creative elevation, and the artwork itself in the semblance of a support; displaying the precious object as itself.

Silver Velvet Monolith appears as a large metallic wall-like structure displaying a range of plastic objects inside a haloed circular hole. The face pointing outwards into the gallery has the monolith as a larger-than-life apparition of radioactive lilac, displaying the plastics almost like an alien sequestering of icons. The funnel, a plastic spoon and a pill case appear alongside an empty picture stand, all clear atop a turquoise ovular base. However, walking around to the bare other side reveals the raw canvas of the structure, and unpainted pine of the frame. It removes any glamorous artificiality and reveals the illusory effect of surrounding the work with iridescent colour. Now, against natural cream and pine, the plastic appears exposed and stripped of its auratic magic. In doing so, the artists also reveal their curatorial power over, and successful manipulation of ostensibly worthless, found objects and how they are interpreted by the viewer.

Doubles and Trebles also acts as a subversion of traditional hierarchies of art history, wherein the material, labour-intensive and technical properties of painting are still often valued above those of photography (and its associated instantaneity) and the ready-made (and its associated lack of artistic intervention). Both Hartley-Skudder and Coleman have a pride in the technical properties of the work they produce. However, they also actively resist the rigid definition of traditional fine art. Alongside the meticulously painted canvases, they include a photograph, *Interface Landscape*, which is mounted on a turquoise plastic base, shining through to give the colours an eerie glow, reminiscent of a computer or phone screen. The smattering of found plastic objects are arranged in compositions of colours and clear angles, and positioned within or on top of canvases. Several items like the funnel, the nail, the pill cases and the soap dishes are presented to us again and again; twinning themselves in the photograph, paintings, and in 'person'.

Another media, light, is also incorporated within this exhibition. *Short Elevated Period*, a circular canvas, is turned to face the wall, exposing for the viewer the material qualities of the folded canvas. Here, the textuality becomes the artwork, with a soft haze of light, a pink square projected on the back. The whole work is mounted on a clear perspex shelf. Carefully lit, a negative double of the canvas is formed in an extended dark second circle, a shadow on the wall. The edges of the perspex shelf are likewise translated into the shadow, forming an elongated trapezoid subsuming the shadowy absent circle. Here, in the orchestrated play of light and shadows, we are unable to recognize the presence of the artificial perspex, seeing it only by the shadow of the bordering rather than the material; the space between ethereality and reality.

Likewise, *Plaskolite Painting*, appears to display a vacant turquoise shelf affixed to the wall. The gallery lights seem to create a luminous fractalization, the semblance of complex faceted rays and shadows on the wall beneath. But this is yet another play. Many of these rays are painted onto the plaster, within a glowing tonal square. This quiet intervention dissolves the viewer's perception of conventional painting and the physical space of the gallery.

In their mastery over representation, both Coleman and Hartley-Skudder simultaneously subvert and undermine it. What appears to be meticulous craftsmanship offers us not an art historical 'window' into reality, but a screen, which resists a simplified reading at each turn. Instead they posit the found objects, continuing to question authorship in the modern tradition. Walter Benjamin posed the concept of the aura of an artwork, something that separates it from a mass-produced image, and mechanical reproduction.³ This presumed artistic 'aura' of an artwork is reliant

on its specificity of location—that there is a singular one of it in a defined space in the world, and the specific temporality—what that individual object's history in time has entailed.

Doubles and Trebles presents the mass-produced objects in—and alongside—the laboriously, handmade, individual paintings. Through their factory-produced multiplicity, the objects exist outside of a singular space or time. Yet, here they are, lovingly and carefully reproduced, stroke by sensuous, minute stroke, in a way which grants them this intangible aura of uniqueness. We are presented with glamorous documentations of toys, receptacles for sweets, and dispensers of medicine, all in space-age plastic. Throughout the exhibition, this results in an uncanny doubling. The repetition of the painted surface, the objects and forms means the whole exhibition is insular in references, self-reflexive and reiterative.

Infinity Mantle presents us with a roll of glossy printed turquoise texture as the base of another composition of plastic objects. Arrayed like a shrine, soap dishes, plastic containers, and candy packaging are displayed on this surface. The roll is actually a close up of the painting *Dissonance* which has been photographed, digitally replicated and printed. The display seems to offer an artificial world of surplus, excess; a consumerist dream in futuristic plastic. Many of these items were created as single or short-use objects to contain perishable items, yet they continue to exist long after their intended contents. The triumph of the exhibition presents us with an altar of mass-production, an acknowledgement of our throw-away culture and creating artwork in the midst of that. We are left with a lurid celebration of synthetics and intangible futures. The single-use materiality is transformed into the singular immateriality of conceptual art. Here is a shrine to inorganic permanence, which, like art, assumes an immortal realm.

The phrase 'doubles and trebles' refers to a way of betting—a strategy where two or more individuals join, gambling that their chances of succeeding together are greater. In this sense, both Hartley-Skudder and Coleman explore their ability as painters, and curators working with found objects and playing into a lavishly visual experience. They gamble that combined, their work will be stronger than alone; and they succeed. The objects within the exhibition are reinvented, reimagined, and granted a second life, granted this theory of the aura. Together, the artists manipulate the original and the depicted, the canvas and the plastic. In an ongoing play of illusion and expectation we cannot trust our own eyes, or have faith in unquestionable authenticity. Their whole exhibition is a masterful sleight of hand.

1. Douglas Davis, 'The work of art in the age of digital reproduction (An evolving thesis: 1991-1995)', *Leonardo*, vol. 28, no. 5, Third Annual New York Digital Salon, 381-386.

2. Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', *October*, vol. 8, Spring 1979, p. 33.

3. Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*. Ed. H. Arendt. New York, Schocken, 217-251.