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# TEELAH GEORGE

STORY TED SNELL

Though Teelah George says she "never wanted to be a painter" and studied textile art at Curtin University, her art practice continues to evolve, combining found objects and storytelling in a way that she says renders her paintings "like a tactile object . . . responsive and malleable".

- 01 Like watching rage, 2014, power tack and graphite on watercolour paper, 165 x 115 x 6cm (framed)
- 02 Notes, memos and charts 3, 2014, oil and enamel on board, 40 x 31cm
- 03 Daily Exercise 3, 2015, oil and enamel on board, 29 x 21cm



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**HOME IS A LOADED WORD.** It is more than just a place of residence; it is a psychological and emotional connection to a locale, a lifestyle, to everyday experience, to family, and to friends. The complexity and interconnectedness of our understanding of the concept of "home" is consolidated for Teelah George when she has the opportunity to work away from Perth. Following her residency at the Gunnery in Sydney late in 2015 she was re-energised. "I started painting over everything because I was so excited about being back in Perth and I felt a kind of urgency to make work. Residencies enable you to see more clearly "where you are", she explains and where she was registered as sharp, strong, bright and clear. "I saw colour again when I returned to Perth." The work she is preparing for new exhibitions in Melbourne and Adelaide certainly has a new intensity and stridency.

Previously George's palette was subtle. In 'Rag Painting 3' and 'Daily Exercise 3', both from 2015, and 'Notes, memos and charts 3' from 2014 there seems to be little happening at first glance. Everything is lost in a field of whiteness, but the layering and removal, the process of hiding and revealing is embodied in the cyclical journey of painting. "Throughout the process, I go back and forth as a way to challenge the painting, and myself. My paintings are an exercise in this very process. There is something inherently personal in it that is potentially unfathomable and equally wonderful," she says.

George began her journey into the unfathomable after leaving art school. Like many young artists, she was disorienting after majoring in textiles at Curtin University, and "ran away" to Belfast for three years because she didn't know what it meant to be an artist and she didn't have the confidence to do whatever needed to be done. However, the impulse to begin working with materials in a generative way eventually returned and Perth was the appropriate place to be "because I could start searching," she explains. "I remember never wanting to be a painter and seeing the two as binary opposites. I had this juvenile idea of painting as a non-tactile, loaded and permanent object – something not of the real world. Painting as a symbol with rigid processes, rather than a gathering of ideas. Now I treat my paintings like a tactile object; they are responsive and malleable."

Her interest in material culture, nurtured while studying textiles, has remained a key component in her work. "Found objects and objectness are very important, and taught me how to interact with paint. I spend a lot of time walking and looking. This is such a fruitful process, it triggers and builds memory, and you find things that fire up connections between ideas." Not surprisingly then, collections and archives are another area of interest, both in content and ideology. "They are representative of our will to keep and tell stories regardless of the inevitable change of all things. So for me they are somewhat paradoxical, they are both permanent and always changing."

In working with various collections in Perth, including the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at the University of Western Australia, George has developed a sophisticated practice that explores storytelling through objects, enhancing their narrative through sympathetic manipulation in the process of making art. "To develop my interest in contextualising place through historical research, I want to align my process of art-making with that of the collection. This will consist of looking at how it is used and how I am able to interact with it. Procedures such as the loan of work, the frequency and structure of my access to works outside those exhibited in the gallery space, reproduction of images of works and the different frameworks for exhibition in a public, collecting institution and a commercial gallery influence the direction of my research. How I navigate these procedures becomes part of my process of making. Making seems like a bi-product to my existence."

It is this sense of urgency and revelation that makes her work so compelling. In her first solo exhibition at OK Gallery in Perth, she explored a family narrative intertwined with the history of the meatworks in Wyndham. For it, she produced a series of extraordinary portraits of characters mined from her family photographic archive, men like 'The Hygienic Butcher (Ted Scott)' from 2015.

An important catalyst in developing her practice was the contact with Melbourne-based artist Richard Lewer, when they were both undertaking a residency at the Fremantle Art Centre in 2013. Lewer was like a vortex for local practitioners, drawing them into his energised understanding of what it meant to be an artist and prompting them to do more, do better, push harder. "So What!" was the needle he used to prick her presumption, to make her think harder and longer, and it proved to be the perfect trigger for an artist keen to take a leap forward.

Not only was Lewer a mentor, he also provided a valuable role model in the studio: full of doubt yet willing to take the chance each day, to find a way through to a solution; and he introduced her to Hugo Michell and curated her into a small show of three young artists from Perth (George, Shannon Lyons and Clare Peake) at the Hugo Michell gallery in Adelaide. It led on to her own curatorial exploration in Getting Things Done held at Fontanelle in Adelaide, which she describes as "... a dialogue with the artists through their work, where I was more of a facilitator than a curator".

Most importantly Lewer showed her "the level of obsession required to make good things". This approach and her interest in the layering of stories and memories embodied in materials lend a particular charge to her prize-winning work in the Fremantle Print Award of 2015, 'Effect of Dose on Taste (New Phase)'. "I am interested in this



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- 04 Sunset on the wall, 2016, oil, enamel, thread, cotton on linen, 31 x 36cm
- 05 Shell song, 2016, oil and enamel on linen, 31 x 36cm
- 06 Picking Rocks, 2014, Blu-Tack on found cardboard, 175 x 150 x 6cm (framed)
- 07 Untitled and Temporary, 2015, Blu-Tack on wall and post at Fontanelle Gallery, dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

sensitivity and how materials can manifest a presence and stimulate memory," she explains, "it is both material and immaterial. I think that this way of thinking about perception is key to engaging with the world, not just my work."

Since leaving art school George has held five solo exhibitions, undertaken residencies in Ireland, Perth and Sydney, entered the collections of the Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, undertaken commissions for the City of Perth and the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, been selected as a finalist in numerous art prizes around the country and won the prestigious Joondalup Invitation Art Award and the Fremantle Print Award. In the past decade she has definitely established herself on the national scene as an artist whose work reveals significant potential and speaks with a distinctive voice.

Her new works are barely constrained by the stretcher. Bursting with energy and infused with newfound vibrancy the Sleazy Vignette series of paintings were part of a solo exhibition at Rubicon ARI Melbourne in April this year, and another solo show at School House Studios Melbourne in May (closing 25 May), and will be at Felt Space in Adelaide in October this year. ■

**EXHIBITION**

A measure of the effect of dose on taste  
**Felt Space, Adelaide**  
 5-22 October, 2016  
[feltspace.org](http://feltspace.org)

[teelahgeorge.com.au](http://teelahgeorge.com.au)

