

Pebblemix a path to Nirvana

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I'm one of those people afflicted with a collectors' mania for accumulating ordinary objects, images and 'stuff'. This has sustained my interest in the cultural and symbolic nature of everyday things and in a sense of culture as being shared, stolen, exploited, distorted, appropriated, and reinterpreted. I'm attracted by the idea of cultural transfer, exchange and influence. My true passion in image making is about playing with fusions of disparate historical and contemporary objects and aesthetics.

My recent drawings and prints stem from an interest in how the West had appropriated Eastern aesthetics to create Chinoiserie. I have the appropriated surface decorations from Chinoiserie for around six years, tongue in cheek, to reinterpret contemporary gadgetry and suburban motifs. With a fondness for humour and play, I aim to explore and impart the wonders as well as the confusions and mishaps, of cultural exchange. *Handy sprayer pump and Hot glue gun, 1999* are relief print assemblages that explore these ideas. The silhouette of the tool (ie glue gun or spray pump) is printed and cut out then has a surface decoration taken from the Chinoiserie style printed over the top of it.

My work is also about highlighting the beauty and strangeness of everyday things. This is evident in the drawing series entitled *Occident, Orient and Outdoor Entertaining, 2004*. In such images, leaf blowers chase Chinese dragons, topiarised Australian animals sit atop Asian style mulchers, and kimono clad figures wield leaf-blowers whilst 'karaoke-ing' on lacy cast iron tables.

I'll begin to explain some of the influences on my work. Ever since the meeting of East and West through trade and travel in the thirteenth century, Western powers have appropriated Eastern ideas and aesthetics. This reached a climax in the arts in the eighteenth century decorative style of Chinoiserie that employed Far Eastern motifs and aesthetics. The bounty of silks, porcelains, lacquer and ivory bursting from East India shipments from around 1600 led to a soaring demand for such goods. European craftsmen were consequently forced to produce their own Chinese style goods that became European

evocations, not merely imitations. Both an imperfect and a romantic understanding of places like China developed amongst Western Europeans as in fine art there was an emphasis on the curio aspects of this culture: such as little people, bound feet, long finger-nailed mandarins, endless tea ceremonies and unusual flora and fauna, to list a few.

What so fascinated the West was the East's 'otherness' or 'exoticness', its spiritual, social and philosophical differences and its visual and aesthetic novelty. This fashion for Chinoiserie or the near and far Eastern exotic was one of many players in part of the development of imperial notions of the Orient that helped fuel a Western hegemony that is under increasing challenge today.

Problems of imperialism aside, such differences serve to highlight ones own cultural qualities and are what make the sharing of cultures so compelling. Of course I'm speaking as if there is one Western culture and one Eastern culture, when we know that both East and West contain a plurality of cultures.

Appropriation as a concept and tool in the arts is not a post-modern phenomenon, but perhaps is now reaching its zenith due to our current global context. There is a dazzling range of technologies in communication and arts production. Appropriation of ideas and trends is at last no longer the preserve of Western imperialism as significant Eastern cultures have hungrily consumed and mimicked much Western popular culture, and continues to do so. Think of the popularity of Ian Thorpe (Australia's own Astro Boy) and Disneyland in Japan or China's love affair with McDonalds. In the contemporary context of global exchange, we are highly accustomed to the infiltration of foreign aesthetics, ideas and matter. I suspect that this is something easily taken for granted now. However, as an artist, it remains a rich source of inspiration, something to be in awe of and warranting exploration. It is the virtue of the artist to be able to use the world as one's palette.

The shopping mall as a key cultural institution, a new Mecca for the West, if you like, has paralleled the rise of secularism in Western society. I don't mean to sound extremist, but to me current domination of a consumer/capitalist paradigm over society has often placed limitations on individuality, creativity, divergent thinking,

freedom of choice, and cultural diversity.¹ This has concerned me since my first trip to a Kmart (as I was typing this paper, the computer knew to correct my spelling of Kmart !)

Technology is a marvel, fashion is interesting, shopping can be fun, objects and clutter can have their own wonder or usefulness, but I'm opposed to the perpetual cycle of planned obsolescence; now the lifetime guarantee is replaced by a five-year warrantee. I'm also opposed to persuasions in consumerism and lifestyle habits often seen in advertisements and product placement in films, and I'm opposed to being convinced that I need to spray this and spray that!

The large ink drawing entitled *Mastervac 2000* (260 x 153cm) exemplifies these concerns. I've latched onto leaf-blowers, not simply the idea of them as ridiculous as it is, but the laughable thing in itself, and I'm finding it hard to let go of the idea that every house in the suburbs needs one. They've entered my private inventory of banal and bad. Noise polluting, anti human, purporting to save time and energy, I don't have faith in them. Have you ever had a good look at a leaf-blower or garden vac? They're bizarre in appearance and carry a visual erotic charge; they're also emblematic of Western veneration of technology and gadgetry, man's upper hand with the 'untamable' wild at play. They represent a relationship with nature as dysfunctional as that of the ordered Elizabethan garden, or the manicured lawns at Versailles.

It's a strange and lonely activity. Perhaps individual leaf-blowers around the 'burbs could unite to create a new religion, perhaps filling the vacuum (pardon the pun) between consumerism, ritual and spirituality.

Plastic spray bottles, shredders and mulchers are just a few other things that have become emblematic of similar concerns with products that aim to tame but inevitably pollute and clutter. The faith invested in these things, the faith in the cultural habits around these things, disturbs and beguiles me. There is a degree of inanity in this sort of consumption. I find that a way of dealing with it rather than feeling depressed about it is via humour. It's an interesting thought that in Buddhist philosophy humour, irony and paradox prevail. Think

¹ See David Lyon: *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Cambridge, 2002 [2000], especially Chapter 5, 'Shopping for a Self.'

of the *koans* a Zen student will address. Whilst I'm not comparing my work to *koans*, I do invent fanciful juxtapositions as a means of coping with difficult truths or strange human habits.

There has also been a proliferation of stone Buddhas and related deities one can now buy. Drawings produced over the past year refer directly to the current trend for Eastern garden sculptures and monuments everywhere in suburban garden stores. (You don't seem to be able to get stone native Australian animals, sadly they must be out of fashion, or maybe I haven't shopped around enough). My work follows from my fascination with the vacuous nature of much garden paraphernalia, and it engages with the ways in which garden ornaments and design shape our suburbs. Of course there's nothing wrong with aspiring to an Eastern philosophy or aesthetic, but when it's in the context of kitschy consumerism I can't help but humorously toy with it.

Does my work express a frustration with the commodification of the sacred? Am I dispirited by the ubiquitous, *ad nauseum* mass reproduction of spiritual images? Is it a cheeky poke at superficial attempts by the West to attain enlightenment with a slice of fantastic plastic at the superdooper garden world? Isn't it wonderful that the West is interested in the East on a deeper, spiritual level? Isn't this a wiser step up from the jolly garden gnome? Isn't the latest taste for Eastern aesthetics a more sophisticated and refined contrast to our recent predilection for concrete swans and topiarised kangaroos? And isn't it magnificent that us urbanites are trying to marry mystique with mod con?

But just what does it mean to the West, (and more importantly to the East) when the meeting of a plastic blow up Bambi and laughing Buddha is not so uncommon. I am sure **Buddha** would have the last laugh.

The aesthetic and spiritual tradition of nature as represented in gardens in the East has always been different to the West. In my drawings the appropriation of an Eastern aesthetic directly contrasts the secular Western content. In *Plassay Sprayers*, 2002 a detail of larger 250cm high scroll, the symbolism and beauty found in *ikebana* are contrasted with the ubiquitous plastic spray pack. In my work it is representative of mans chemical and mechanical supremacy over

nature in our world. The history of Eastern inter-connectedness of animal/human/universal and natural elements contrasts with the West's history of dividing these same elements; the plastic bottle also becomes reminiscent of the West's history of a God created and God ordered natural world. The East's contemplation of the natural world as a potent and intrinsic part of spiritual philosophy and divine force² is represented in the *ikebana* arrangements that, in this work, look somewhat threatened by the long and menacing hose and nozzle.

The contemporary urban sense of acquisition and attainment fits well with the Eastern monument as commodity. The monument symbolises those humanistic and meditative values of Eastern philosophy that we mightn't have the time to actually pursue, but still would love to attain. Before acquisition comes aspirations, ideals of perfection, order, rightness, and the striving for 'personal best'. Enter the leaf-blower; enter the whipper-snipper.

Christian moral 'uprightness' finds itself in manicured lawns and pleasant blooms of iceberg roses, whilst the awesome omnipresence of nature is revered in Eastern rocks, waterfalls and visions of untamed beauty. The Western suburban garden, no great fount of spirituality, still undeniably provides a contemporary context for personal retreat and fulfilment. But there is probably not much sense that between the fence palings and above the tidy lawn hovers a numinous nature and sublime mystery.

However with urban rituals of barbecues, whipper snipping and leaf blowing we can celebrate and nurture our slice of the natural world, as contrived as it may have become. The repetitive and ritualistic carrying out of these activities may help foster a sense of identity and personal connection with natural elements. Never mind the interruption of the wailing of the lawnmower.

Six Station Lawn Genie and *Pebblemix a path to Nirvana 2004* are drawings that are a response to these ideas. The six-panel format of these drawings extends from previous works, which directly referred to the Asian tradition of scrolls and screens. The black individual frames suggest a folding screen and both a division yet unification of a continuous world or narrative. I've appropriated the Eastern

² Peter Oldmeadow: *Zen: An Ancient Path to Enlightenment for Modern Times*, Lansdowne, 2001, 56-59.

aesthetic of flattening out the picture plane so that there is no attempt to create an illusion of depth or space, elements float all over the composition and drift up and off the top end of the paper, regardless of scale. Characteristically East Asian in appearance, this quality has always suggested to the Western canon a naivety in representation. What Western aesthetes had overlooked in the past was the fact that the illusion of space wasn't as important as the structural unity of surface pattern and sensorial evocations. In my work it encourages the impression of an infinite wonderland that suspends reality, time and place; essential qualities for a quasi-spiritual retreat.³

The pebblemix paving that erratically winds its way through *Pebblemix a path to Nirvana* symbolises Western search for peace, calm and enlightenment in the context of Western secular lifestyle pressures. Of course, the path is not clear and it is not certain whether Nirvana (in this instance, a cosmic void delivered from consumerist pressures) is attained.

Garden hoses snake their way across *Six Station Lawn Genie* to delicately shower each attendant Buddha. The quasi-Rococo patterns of water spray indicate an especially Australian folly, an obsession for 'greener than green grass' requiring unsustainable water use. (We may expect the redundancy of the humble sprinkler soon...) Buddha may be a reminder that in a secular suburban context we can easily forget the universal ritualistic and symbolic importance of water, something not to be taken for granted.

Quaint yet vacuous concrete statues of bucolic children at wells or posing in reverie remind us of Western nostalgic representations of what it means to commune with nature. This aesthetic contrasts directly with the fashion in nurseries at the moment for the bonsai plant. It appeals as an aesthetic of 'otherness' and contrasts to what most of us suburbanites are used to. It also gets closer to ideas around Zen aesthetics that abstracted natural elements to metaphorically represent the universe and to teach Buddhist principles of patience and one-ness with nature. Related aesthetics obviously concur with a Western yearning for stillness, simplicity and a sublimation of desires in our complex lives.

³ Francois Cheng: *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, Boston, 1994, 42.

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In *Six Station Lawn Genie detail* we see lots of wheelie-bins. Now universally iconic and emblematic of the role of waste in our lives, they play an important part in the maintenance of our backyard lifestyle, with the potential to fill them with untold and unsorted quantities of anything and everything. In these works, the bin has become the perfect podium for the odd *foo dog*, used traditionally outside Chinese buildings to ingest then purge any evil spirits or nasty stuff.

Also included in this series is the recurring Bambi or cutesy animal motif. These are drawn directly from my kitschy collection of such things and they're inserted into this context to question the spiritual veracity of other elements and to humorously align the dreaded distinctions between high and low art, banalities and profundities.

The barbecue has some to serve as an important icon in my work. Possibly adopted from the Japanese *hibachi*, it has entered the Australian outdoor ritual effortlessly.

Neo Jumbuks 2003 (250 x 76cm) is an ink drawn scroll covered in up to one hundred or so different barbecues. Each barbecue is a delicate and surprising mix of Eastern/Western, spiritual/secular imagery. Formally and conceptually the barbecue motif has been an ideal platform for parody of suburban motifs and habits whilst investing a popular gadget with new spiritual and cultural significance. At play is also a strong contradiction of functional gadget and aesthetic object, a strong theme running throughout my work.

In *Pebblemix a path to Nirvana* the giant topiarised platypus reminds us of the urban fetish for the big and blown up, that is the oversized iconography of outdoor symbols. The kimono clad figures rush in awe and veneration to this new deity carefully manicured using a special European technique. A blowing up or over-sizing of pop-cultural items has really taken off in the centres of places such as Japan, following Western prompts. Such things become ludic symbols to worship, speaking of a community's identity, labour interests and secular values, not to mention commercial interests. Perhaps the capacity for such urban symbols to unite a community in a non-threatening and benign manner is more powerful than the constraints of any religious dogma. The instant (often short lived) appeal of such icons

represents the exciting and sensational limitlessness of our creativity and our desire for fantasy.

In the same drawing, an enthusiastic bash at Totem tennis is a cross-cultural pun reminding us of the global exchange of habits and activities. Kimonoed figures suggest a higher cultural entity partaking in a fairly banal suburban game thereby again blurring the serious and absurd. Aboriginal figurines, once popular in suburban Australian gardens are a tragic 'kitschification' and naïve glorification of what questionably represented something about being an Australian.

The translation into concrete and paint removes a respectful Aboriginality and spirituality. In the context of my drawings they exemplify curious pop-cultural trends in ornamentation and heighten the bizarre meeting of the various elements, especially when alongside a traditional Chinese eye doctor who casts a stern glance at a dizzy-eyed frog constructed from shells.

The current vogue for Pacific Island carvings is represented in my work by the (overly-mystified) Easter Island statue. Is it about suburban yearnings for both 'primitive otherness' and a simpler down-shifted lifestyle? Is it a sculpted block of mysticism and enigma created to counter an overdose of technological rationalism? Instead of a gigantic conversation piece, perhaps this statue could stand in as a poignant reminder of the demise of the Easter Islanders because of an overzealous faith in religion when faced with self-perpetuated environmental destruction. The obvious parallel here is with our own certainty that in the face of diminishing resources, global warming and so on, technology and science (the twenty-first century religion) will save the day. Just as well we can buy the antidote in concrete. St Francis of Assisi (second from the left in a detail from *Pebblemix a path to Nirvana*) is perfect for the garden, Saint and saviour of animals and the natural world. I'd stock up now if I were you!

In this image, frog wields garden-vac at rabbit brandishing whipper-snipper, at monkey flaunting leaf-blower... a playful chase or nature and technology meeting and out of control? The images here are a direct appropriation from *The Animal Scrolls*, from twelfth century Japan. This is a famous series of four scrolls created by a Buddhist artist-priest, where animals were drawn in human activities that are

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supposed to have satirised abuses within the Buddhist priesthood at that time.

Gadgets such as leaf-blowers and shredders and mulchers in the context of these drawings take on quasi-divine or supernatural powers. Their true roles are transformed as they chase Chinese dragons or puff out clouds or create topiarised animals. It's a humorous and surreal interpretation of enigmatic looking objects and a reminder of the potential spiritual power or symbolism an inanimate object may bear... which doesn't really seem to be a secular concern. I'll finish by way of swan song. In a series of drawings entitled *Not in my backyard*, I've playfully immortalised and perhaps spiritually uplifted the rubber swan, a forgotten and endangered Australian garden icon ingeniously crafted from old car tyres.

Artists are generally regarded for their observations of the world around them. It's the ambiguities and associations made between disparate elements that provoke a reordering of the everyday or accepted truths, rather than an expression of a complete idea that I am interested in. I don't intend to make proclamations, just draw attention to things worth noticing.

The fabric of my work has often looked very busy, chaotic with great attention paid to detail. It is a reflection of a love for what I call a global cacophony of things (remember my collecting of stuff feeds my artistic interests). It's not exactly related to the Mecca of the shopping mall, but my habit of collecting stuff and appropriating visual information from other cultures is my personal ritualistic behaviour and I know there are many who share similar habits. I have faith in these things, I have faith in pluralism and diversity, and the strangeness of life.

APPENDIX 1



APPENDIX 2

