

Constructive curiosities

A visual reflection on the Medical History Museum collection

Peter Garnick

The journey to the collection

The subject matter for my exhibitions over the past two years came from the construction site for the new Royal Women's Hospital. As an unintended consequence, I became acquainted with the Hospital's rich archives, lovingly preserved over their 150 year history. This in turn led me to the University of Melbourne's own potent and precious Medical History Museum, one of the University's 33 remarkable cultural collections.

The intriguing, and at times sobering, objects from the Medical History Museum struck me as perfect construction sites in miniature.

The challenge to reveal once again the hidden elegance of man-made structures—albeit of a significantly different scale—proved irresistible.

The Museum's curator, Ms Ann Brothers, graciously provided time and access to these prized objects. Ms Brothers' passion and commitment to the collection also enhanced my respect for and understanding of contemporary protocols for handling such items. Over a three month period in mid-2008 I spent time with some of the most evocative items in the collection. The resulting imagery was included in *Curative curiosities*, a solo exhibition held in late 2008.

Basis for artistic practice

The Russian-American painter Mark Rothko once said that if you could remove all function from the objects around us, everything would become abstract art. When I first read this I experienced a 'Eureka moment'; for as long as I can remember I have had the facility to see the world of functioning objects around me as mere patterns of colours and textures.

The application of this visual point of view to my image-making has been articulated by Naomi Cass, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Photography. While Ms Cass's remarks were in response



Previous page: Peter Garnick, *Ornithological*, 2008, C-type print, 47.0 x 95.0 cm. Private collection. Image based on surgical instruments from the collection of the Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne.

to construction imagery, she has divined my underlying thought processes:

It is this radical absence of a frame of reference for scale that contributes to the power of these images, be they large or small ... this is the story of geometry, of form and tone, of structure and repetition of positive and negative forms, of light and dark, of restrained colour.

But far from a dull formula, Garnick finds pleasure and drama in positive and negative space, in robust contrasts and unexpected breaks in pattern and rhythm. In many respects the real subject of the work is light. Absence of light, variations of light, plays of light across surfaces and light reflected.¹

Contextual response

Rothko's proposition to remove all function was facilitated for me by the simple fact that my life experiences to date had not provided me with much of a functional understanding of medical instruments or indeed construction materials. The story is quite different, however, for those viewers with an intimate and functional understanding of the

subject matter. Some of the most surprising and thought-provoking responses to my construction imagery came from construction industry professionals. Their reactions reflected the tension between their own practical relationship to the objects and my formalistic representations of the materials of their trade. As a consequence of this, I sought reactions to my medical instrument imagery from medical professionals. One of the most thoughtful and articulate was the University's Professor Glenn Bowes, Associate Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. Professor Bowes subsequently agreed to open the *Curative curiosities* exhibition. He began by placing the subject matter in the context of its medical setting:

Complex equipment, uniquely shaped instruments, coloured solutions, the gleaming appearance of the untouched sterilised paraphernalia, all have the capacity to evoke powerful emotions—again with both positive and negative outcomes. There is little doubt that elements of that visual mystery bring with them some sense of healing power that derives itself as much from the emotion of the

sensory experience as from the intellectual understanding of the rational scientific basis underpinning the treatment. The aesthetic exposure translates into the therapeutic experience.²

The objects induce emotional reactions on both sides of the medical transaction. Another feature that resonated with Professor Bowes as a medical practitioner was the images' challenging historical aspects:

The objects represented were in their time part of the wondrous advance of medical science from which generations of humans have benefited. Yet now they appear very much to be relics of a past age. What was then cutting edge best practice is now almost comically ancient, and all this has occurred in the short time span of my professional life.

This poignant reflection is applicable to many of the University's cultural collections. Professor Bowes concluded by observing the power of the objects to vividly document the breadth and rate of change:

The explosion of knowledge has truly been astounding and continues at an exponentially

Peter Garnick, *Double dose*, 2008,
C-type print, 47.0 x 84.0 cm.

Private collection.

Image based on vials of anaesthetic from the
collection of the Medical History Museum,
University of Melbourne.

See also front cover of magazine.



increasing pace. How arrogant we were then to emanate such power and mastery in our practice through our precious ownership of these magical objects! How humbling it is now to have these past icons consigned to the role of historical curiosities in an exhibition of photographic artistry. The sophisticated science of contemporary photographic method mocking the now extinct functional significance of last century's scientific breakthroughs!

The next chapter

My initial experience with the Medical History Museum was enhanced by the Cultural Treasures Days in 2008. This precious opportunity to visit the University's diverse collections whetted my appetite for further artistic investigation. It has been a privilege to engage with one of the collections and with the individuals entrusted with its preservation. It is my sincere hope that the exhibition of these artworks contributes to wider recognition of and support for the

University's Cultural Collections and their guardians.

Boston-born Peter Garnick has been a photographic artist for nearly 40 years. His work has been exhibited overseas and in Australia, and he is represented in public, private and corporate collections here and in the USA and the UK. He is represented by Blacksphere Fine Art.

Notes

- 1 Naomi Cass, opening of *Constructive ragpickings*, Atrium Gallery, Sofitel Melbourne, February 2009.
- 2 Glenn Bowes, opening of *Curative curiosities*, Blacksphere Fine Art, October 2008.