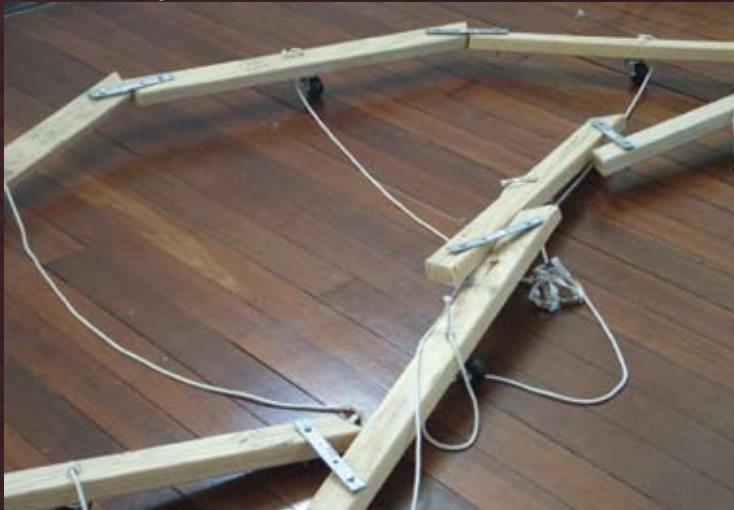


HOW GIAN MANIK & JACOB OGDEN SMITH WORKS

Why HOW WORKS

HOW WORKS brings together works by Gian Manik and Jacob Ogden Smith; two artists whose practices may at first seem diametrically opposed. Initially working across multiple disciplines, Smith has become increasingly concerned with formal process, the majority of his current work focused on ceramics. Manik alternatively has moved from a figurative background into a conceptually-driven approach spanning numerous media.

Smith is concerned with the art object and how it sits in an historical context, while Manik's objects are almost secondary to his conceptual exploration – not unconsidered, but at times unrefined and intentionally crude.



Smith's work is about the moment the artwork is finished and enters the register of objects that make up the world; Manik's, the art object as a by-product of the artistic process.

Smith's work is a distilling – of practically the entire history of art making and collecting – into a minimal and considered engagement with specific media and aesthetics. Manik's by contrast takes a small sequence of related concepts and explodes them across a range of media, of which only a selection are exhibited.

In considering the objects and paintings the artists have created for HOW WORKS, the most obvious commonality seems to be their flaunting of intentionally 'bad' technique. Smith freely admits that his ceramics skills are as yet formative – faults and impurities in his glazes are embraced as part of the work and he purposefully references the chunky brown stoneware readily found at second hand shops. Manik utilises rudimentary Photoshop to create crude digital images and delights in his ill-refined carpentry skills. Both make use of low-tech video to augment their objects. This serves to lend both their practices a general veneer of detached critique, however a close reading of their works suggests that there is more at stake, and more in common between them.

Smith's practice is preoccupied with the curious nature of the art object, questioning its function in the world and its historical allusions to luxury and prestige. His early works abounded with references



to old master paintings and the legacies of abstraction and minimalism.

One early series of gaudy abstract canvasses with matching waste paper baskets, *Untitled sets* (2006), allocated a practical function to the art object – albeit the disposal of waste. Even more ironic was an untitled video from the same time period of paint drying – art and artist as time waster. *Modern man reclining* (2005), was a photographic self-portrait of the artist as Titian's Venus of Urbino (and, by extension, Manet's Olympia), reinterpreting an oft-emulated icon of classism with a contemporary soft-core twist – artist as pornographer and prostitute – while the video work *Dirty Blonde* in 2007 was a minimal shifting colour-field created from an extreme close-up of hard-core pornography. In another series of photographs, *Interior – Displacement* (2006), minimal black canvasses inhabited an opulent domestic environment as if having taken the place of their owners. These were exhibited with glossy black ceramic *Love Objects*, abstract forms made up of crevices, orifices and protrusions, inviting non-gendered erotic interaction, a suggestion that was literalised in his body of graduate work the following year, a series of minimal vessels with an accompanying video demonstrating their masturbatory function. All these works commented playfully on the desire associated with the purchase and collection of the art object, but Smith's various points of reference – refuse, waste, prostitution, pornography, greed and sex toys – could not be more cynical.



It is not surprising therefore that his current works should have turned their attention to the genre of ceramics – a medium that has historically been associated equally with elite status, but also the most basic pragmatic purpose (vessels for food preparation and consumption, the cleaning of the body and disposal of waste). A recent video work showed clay being put through an extruder to excremental effect, exhibited alongside a pile of minimal tuned pots to allude to this disjuncture, as do his new films of bowls being filled with a variety of ambiguous mashed, starchy, gruel-like foodstuffs, or his finely thrown minimal vessels spattered diarrhoeotically with gold glaze. This disjuncture, Smith seems to be suggesting, is as relevant to the body as to his chosen medium; it's value is always in question, veering between pragmatism and sublimity - the aestheticised body, it's surfaces gleaming with desire, versus the body as a vessel for the processing of waste, an empty vessel to fuck or be fucked.

While Smith's exploration has become more tightly-focused and discipline-driven over time, Manik's has followed almost the opposite trajectory. Initially from a formal painting background, concerned with figurative depictions of the body, his work has evolved to encompass numerous media, and is largely concept-driven. From an initial idea, his exploration is methodically expanded adhering to a private logic of the artist's, still generally incorporating painting, but also sculpture, video, costume and performance.



Manik's early works included paintings of isolated body parts, rendered sensually, yet clinically. His move into interdisciplinary practice was largely in order to alleviate the body from the "limitations" of the painting medium. At first glance it may appear that the body is now largely absent from his exploration, but it is still central, though implicit. His recent creations include tubes and coils reminiscent of intestines, fringes of wool suggestive of hair, the literal use of body parts such as animal fur, stand-ins like prosthetic teeth, or paintings and casts of limbs in action, but separated from their bodies. Such works, and the titles he gives them – including nonsense words of his own invention incorporating far too many vowels – evoke the part-object, the very young child's relation to the body not as a whole, but rather a series of isolated organs with functions relating to drives and desires. When bodies are present in Manik's work, they are anonymous. In his video of the activation of his large wooden octagon by eight figures with straps attached to their ankles (walking rhythmically in a circle to spin the work on its castors), the participants are costumed in identical sack-like shrouds and stockings, obliterating any distinguishing features. Similarly, at a talk he gave following a studio residence at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2008, much of Manik's discussion focused on issues to do with body, but the series of photographs and paintings on display were close-up portraits of his face, features obscured behind white makeup, with little else visible.

These – like a more recent series documenting the artist in a costume of stocking material with a white woollen fringe on the head – were not intended as self-portraits.

Rather the artist's own body had been used for convenience, a mere tool like paint or wood. At the same open studio event, the central part of Manik's room was taken up by a messy scattering of objects including a large globe suspended within a network of tangled cord. Though absent, it was clear that this space had been created by and for a body, the presence of which hovered ghost-like within the space, amidst the smeared white markings on the floor, the torn paper and tangled string.

Despite the seemingly random nature of materials in installation/performance works such as this, Manik's sculptural palette is carefully considered. In most cases they are objects with a practical function – hardware supplies for example - that he ignores or subverts. Many of the works utilise time-consuming processes such as paper mache, knotting, French knitting and hand-sewing, that are relatively simplistic but recognised on an infinitely more proliferative scale than is usual.

For HOW WORKS, Manik has utilised such techniques to create a landscape of curious objects for the viewer to negotiate, but not necessarily understand. Conforming to their own logic (a system of interrelated ideas including the number eight, knotting and various simple processes),



they are mechanisms, not for the production of meaning, but rather the production of production itself – the continuation of a sequence of ideas and processes that play off against each other. Hence, we are confronted by a proliferation of vaguely bodily stuff, but the drive that caused it is not evident. A tension emerges, between a very present, excessive corporeality (metres and metres of oversized French knitting) and the apparent absence of the idea, the hard kernel of desire that inspired it.

In contrast, Smith toys with the erotics of his audience's gaze. The importance of audience interaction to his practice is evidenced by a recent work in which a video screen nestled in a pile of almost-identical minimal ceramic vessels plays a live feed of the audience viewing it, displaying their reaction – and their body - back to them as part of the work. The implication is that the viewer too is yet another vessel, a beautiful commodity, but an empty one. His works are teasing, yet deadpan, so that it becomes unclear (in most cases) whether the artist is purposefully alluding to sex or excrement, or if it is the viewer's own dirty mind that is conjuring such associations.

When read in this way, Manik's and Smith's work does not seem so unrelated. On one hand there is the evocation of an absent body (that is nonetheless proliferate), on the other an aestheticised, commodified one (that nonetheless churns out the stuff of the corporeal). This contradiction, they both suggest, this failure

of the body to make sense, is comparable to the failure of the artwork to behave as a cultural object. This perhaps is why both artists take pleasure in 'bad' technique. Tempering this self-conscious 'badness' however is that both their works adhere to a minimal colour palette of creams and off-whites. This formal concern may at first seem at odds with the content of their practices - a sarcastic nod toward respectable historical lineage - but it is in fact their least ironic gesture, a skewed minimalist sensibility that is at the heart of what makes their work work.

Andrew Nicholls

References to or quotes by Manik and Smith refer to discussions between the artists and author during January and February 2009.

- page 2. Gian Manik, *Aggembogaata* (detail) 2008, Pine, Plastic, cord, casters, steel, Dimensions variable
- page 3. Jacob Ogen Smith, *Interior-Displacement*, 2006, archival inkjet print, 70x50cm
- Jacob Ogden Smith, *Love Object: DVD* (Still), 2008, digital video, 16 minutes 48 seconds
- page 4. *Extrusion/Excretion*, 2008, digital video, 6:09 seconds
- page 5. *Untitled #1* (Detail, Front) 2006, Oil on canvas, pine, 113x70x7cm
- page 6. *Eight Rung Mathematical Knot*, 2008, Pine, cord, steel, Dimensions variable





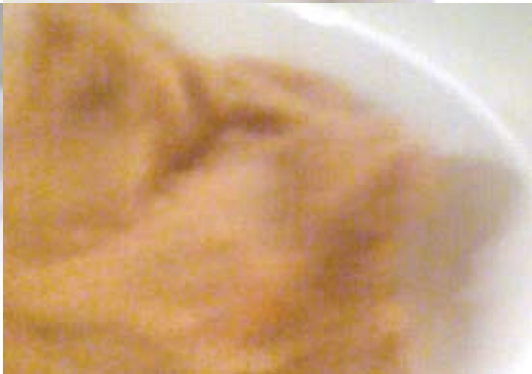






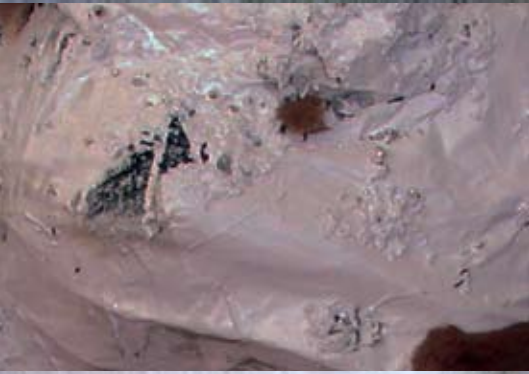










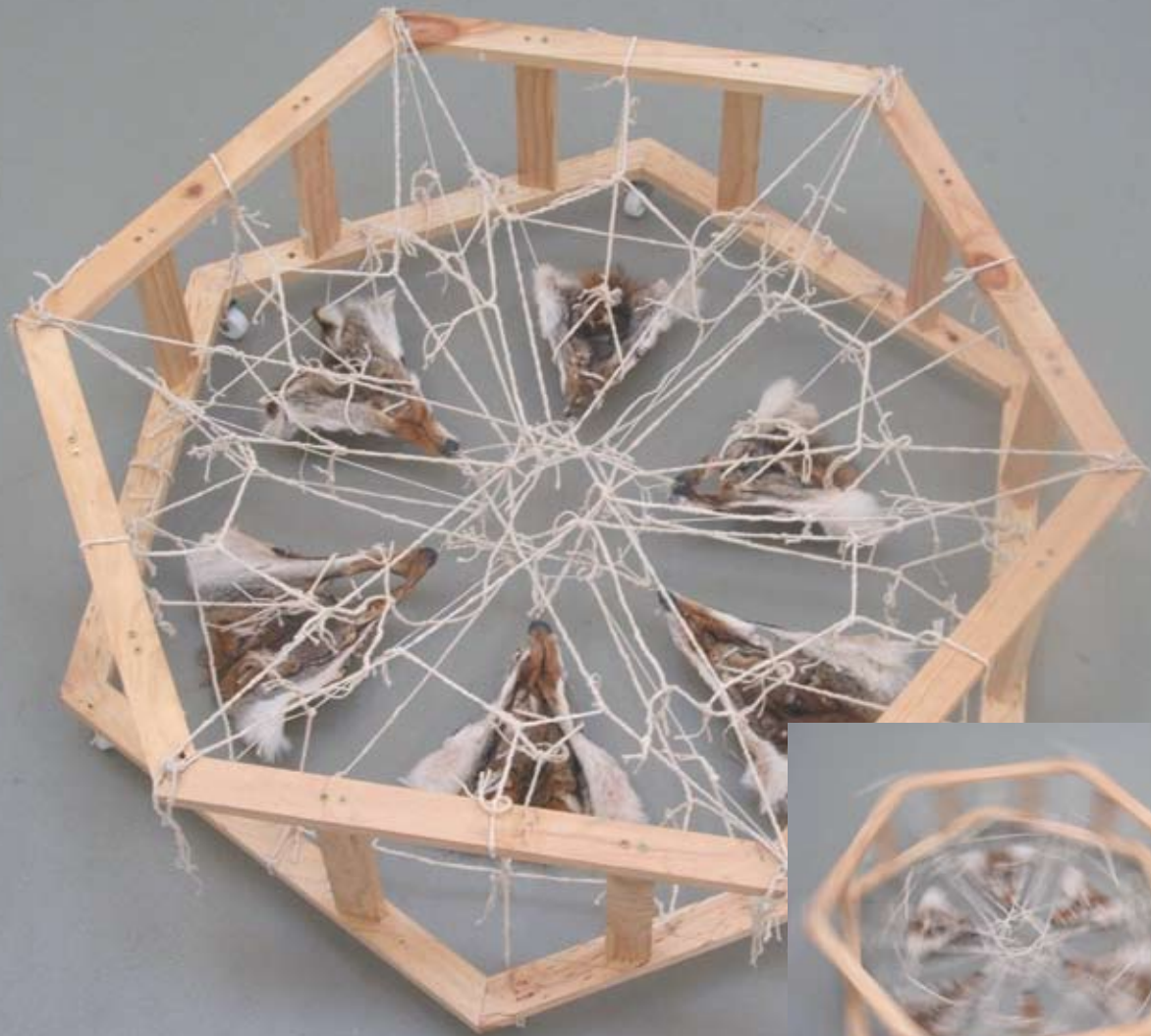




















Jacob Ogden Smith

Education

2007

Bachelor of Art (Fine Art)

Curtin University of Technology, Bentley

2005

Advanced Diploma of Fine Art and Craft

Western Australian School of Art and Design,
Northbridge

Selected Group Exhibitions

2008

Staffroom, Moores Building Contemporary Art
Gallery, Fremantle

2007

Lucky Dip, Palmcourt Gallery, Perth

Curtin Graduate Exhibition, Curtin University of
Technology, Bentley

Pink, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art,
Northbridge

Helping Hands, PalmCourt Gallery, Perth
Domestica, Heathcote Museum & Gallery,
Applecross

2006

The Devil at the Church, The Church Gallery,
Northbridge

Relaxed and Comfortable, Moores Building
Contemporary Art Gallery, Fremantle

Hatched 06, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art,
Northbridge

Gomboc Sculpture Survey, Gomboc Gallery,
Middle Swan

2006

Grand Gestures, Moores Building Contemporary
Art Gallery, Fremantle

2005

Hot Contents, 2005 WASAD Graduate Show,
Central TAFE, Northbridge

SEX: Annual Erotic Art Award, BreadBox Gallery,
Northbridge

Duty Free, Artshouse Gallery, Northbridge

Bibliography

Ric Spencer, '*Shining spirit of collaboration*',
The West Australian, June 23 2007

Andrew Nicholls, '*Art about Art*', Australian Art
Review, March-June 2007

Ric Spencer, '*Domestic Hit and Bliss*',
The West Australian, May 5 2007

Matthew Jackson, '*Grand Gestures*',
www.artseeninwa.com, January 2006

Anna Kesson, '*SEX: slippery viewing*', Real Time,
No. 70 Dec 2005 – Jan 2006

Anna Kesson, '*Steaming up the Bakery*', Pelican,
Vol.78, Ed.8, October 2005

Judith McGrath, '*Between Erotic and a hard
place*', X-Press, October 13 2005

Ric Spencer, '*Students lead the way*',
The West Australian, January 22 2005

Grants

2005

ArtsWa New Concept Grant

City of Fremantle Cultural Sponsorship Grant

Gian Manik

Education

2007

Bachelor of Art (Fine Arts, Honours), 1A.
Curtin University of Technology, Bentley

2006

Bachelor of Art (Fine Arts).
Curtin University of Technology, Bentley

Selected Group Exhibitions

2009

Yellow vest syndrome, Fremantle art centre,
Fremantle

2008

Staffroom, Moores Building Contemporary Arts
Gallery, Fremantle

Groupshow, Plum Gallery, Kalamunda
Joondalup Invitation Art Award Exhibition,
Lakeside Shopping Complex, Joondalup

2007

Lucky Dip, Palmcourt Gallery, Perth
Hatched 2007, Perth Institute of Contemporary
Arts, Northbridge

Curtin Degree Show, Curtin University, Bentley

Public House, Little Creatures, Fremantle

Cream of the Crop, Canary Arts Centre,
Esperance

2006

Plush, Keith and Lottie, Northbridge
Curtin Degree Show, Curtin University, Bentley
Working Exhibition, Palmcourt Gallery, Perth

2005

Salvation, Old Palace Hotel, Northbridge

2003

Perspectives, Art Gallery of Western Australia,
Northbridge

Residencies

2008

Studio Residency at Perth Institute of
Contemporary Arts

Graduate in Residence at Curtin University of
Technology

Studio Residency at C.I.A. (Centre for
Interdisciplinary Arts, Northbridge)

Grants and Awards

2008

DCA Young People and the Arts, Project
Development

2007

Studio Achievement Award, 1st Class Honours,
Top Studio mark.

2004-2006

Deans Commendation for Outstanding Academic
Achievement.

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Shit Heap, 2008-09, glazed stoneware, television, video camera, dimensions variable

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Shit Heap (Detail), 2008-09

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Crap cracked bowls, 2008-09, glazed porcelain, stoneware, crystal, 30cm diameter

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Crap cracked bowl, (Detail), 2008-2009

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Gian Manik

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Aggembogaata, 2008, Digital video, 9:32 seconds

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