

What Does it Mean to Notice?

Imagine the cadmium yellows, the ultramarine and phthalo blue, brilliant vermillion, of light touching your retinas to form an impression of a suburban street. Pulled up on the verge-side, you reach for your phone to take a photograph, noticing the moment a ray of light permeates a cloud. Picture the way droplets of atmospheric water scatter and absorb illumination from the sun, and how this coloured weight is mirrored by the slung belly of a powerline, the curve of pavement disappearing to a point unseen, the reflective grit of asphalt. These are the ephemeral instances Annette Peterson gathers her attention to, and it is from these observations that she has created three new works: *Through the Lights*, *Through the Trees* and *Through the Streets*.

There is something liberating about the way Peterson's works linger. In *How To Do Nothing*¹, author and artist Jenny Odell reflects on her experience of watching a performance of John Cage's *Song Books*, a three-movement piece in which no music is played. Often thought of as an exercise in conceptualism, Odell instead notes that "each time it's performed, the ambient sound, including coughs, uncomfortable laughter, and chair scrapes, is what make up the piece". Upon leaving the symphony hall, Odell reports that her ears are newly attuned to a variety of ordinary sounds, an aural abundance she wouldn't have normally noticed. This is the effect of Peterson's attentive representations of suburban streets – the viewer may find themselves leaving the exhibition and re-discovering traffic lights, bollards, and bitumen, all aglow in mid-afternoon light or flush with puddles from a recent rain.

And yet, Peterson's work initiates something rather more complex than simply pointing at the world and saying 'this understated aspect of suburban vernacular exists, pay attention'. *Through the Lights*, *Through the Trees* and *Through the Streets* are stop-motion animations which each consist of roughly seventy individual paintings, derived from photographs, re-mediated digitally as single frames. It is at the seams where each medium joins, and in the way Peterson expands and contracts these interstices, that a more sophisticated tension arises; that between what is seen, and what is not.

In making these works, the imagery of suburban streets undergoes a number of iterations; first, as photographs taken on a mobile-phone; second, as paintings using the photographs as references; and finally, as animations made by digitising the paintings as individual stop-motion frames. This sequential re-mediation evidences Peterson's continued interest in thresholds of perception, belying a sensitivity to the way the eyes move, and how the brain organises perceptions into recollection and meaning; sensations are translated and re-embodied in acts of seeing, seeing again, forgetting, and remembering. In transmuting visual information from one medium to the next, Peterson doesn't seek to repeat, but allows for the emergence of perceptive slips, wet-paint impressions, and the importance of the gaps between frames which create movement. Whilst for Odell, an almost oppressive mindful attentiveness

¹ 2019, 101

is the aim, for Peterson, the slippage, the slanted reminiscence, and a fluctuating awareness are fundamental to what it means to notice.

This generosity towards each medium becomes clearer when considering her use of mobile-phone photography in particular. There is a certain suspicion which exists around the use of photographs as references to paint from, an idea that doing so will ‘flatten’ the subject or experience. This reproduces a constructed friction between photography and painting, a hierarchical binarization of image-making in which the painting is thought of as embodied and temporal, and the photograph as disembodied and instantaneous. That is to say, photographs are considered fast, cheap, and shallow, and painting slow, deliberate, and animate – to paint from a photograph is therefore to corrupt it. Perhaps this relates to the genesis of photography as both art and science, a persisting assumption that photographs are more technical, more prescriptive in their imaging capacity than paintings. If a painting is a poem, a photograph is a non-fiction essay². Working from a photograph rather than from ‘life’ is thus alleged to reduce the lyrical capacity of the painting.

Peterson’s embrace of smartphone photography as a starting point for her painted animations challenges this outmoded idea. In acknowledging the embeddedness of pocket-sized cameras in our day to day lives, she questions whether we really ‘see’ without photography, ubiquitous as it has become. Looking at her broader practice, it might be said that Peterson treats photography similarly to plein-air painting – neither ‘captured moment’ is bereft of life just for attempting to convey ephemerality. Her works tacitly acknowledge that observation is often negotiated, if not always through, then perhaps in relation to, phone photography. And of course, in her complex interweaving of different media and her sense of material reciprocity, there is a reversal: Peterson paints from photographs, but might it also be said that she photographs like a painter?

Thinking about Peterson’s wider exploration of ephemeral atmospheric conditions, her affinity with the Impressionist painters might be framed as a point of paradoxical difference and refusal. As a woman artist working in (and through) the traditions of Impressionism, Peterson offers a subtle subversion of gendered artist roles by inhabiting a public space (suburban streets) via the independent practice of driving – neither of these actions were available to the original female Impressionists. Peterson’s challenge to the history of her medium is thrown into further relief when considering the largely masculinist car-culture which exists in Australia. In a sense, though Impressionism has long since ceased to be avant-garde, Peterson’s Impressionistic-inspired practice occupies a radical position.

Through these iterative and mobile understandings of photograph, paint, and animation frame, the viewer is returned to the suburban street. Light has a propensity to change, and cars to be in motion.

² This observation is borrowed from Jennifer Mills’ article ‘Dear Jennifer’, *Art Monthly Australia*: 241, July 2011

For Peterson, noticing these aspects of the everyday involves a material recognition of movement, via re-mediation. Beyond simply gesturing towards what is often overlooked, Peterson engages in a delicate and somewhat elusive play with perception, memory, and attention, as well as the soft edges of her materials. She calls on us to wonder, what does it mean to be on a familiar street, hearing the skim of tires through oil-slick water, watching light reflect between the bitumen and the clouds – and is what we see unmediated, or already embedded in a process of re-imaging?