

Gail Hastings: Sculptuations

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What first draws me to Gail Hastings's work is her accomplished hand and the alluring quality of her watercolours into which she incorporates text both earnest and ironic, playful and engaging. Her application of watercolour and pencil on rag paper is executed with aesthetic rigour; the careful way she loads her brush and renders text and structure is captivating. The watercolours articulate space, and invite the viewer in. They are like thoughts that are rooms with walls that we enter conceptually. As thought, this presence accompanies the viewer from room to room. A plot unfolds, then turns back on itself: it is poetic, witty and always visually accomplished.

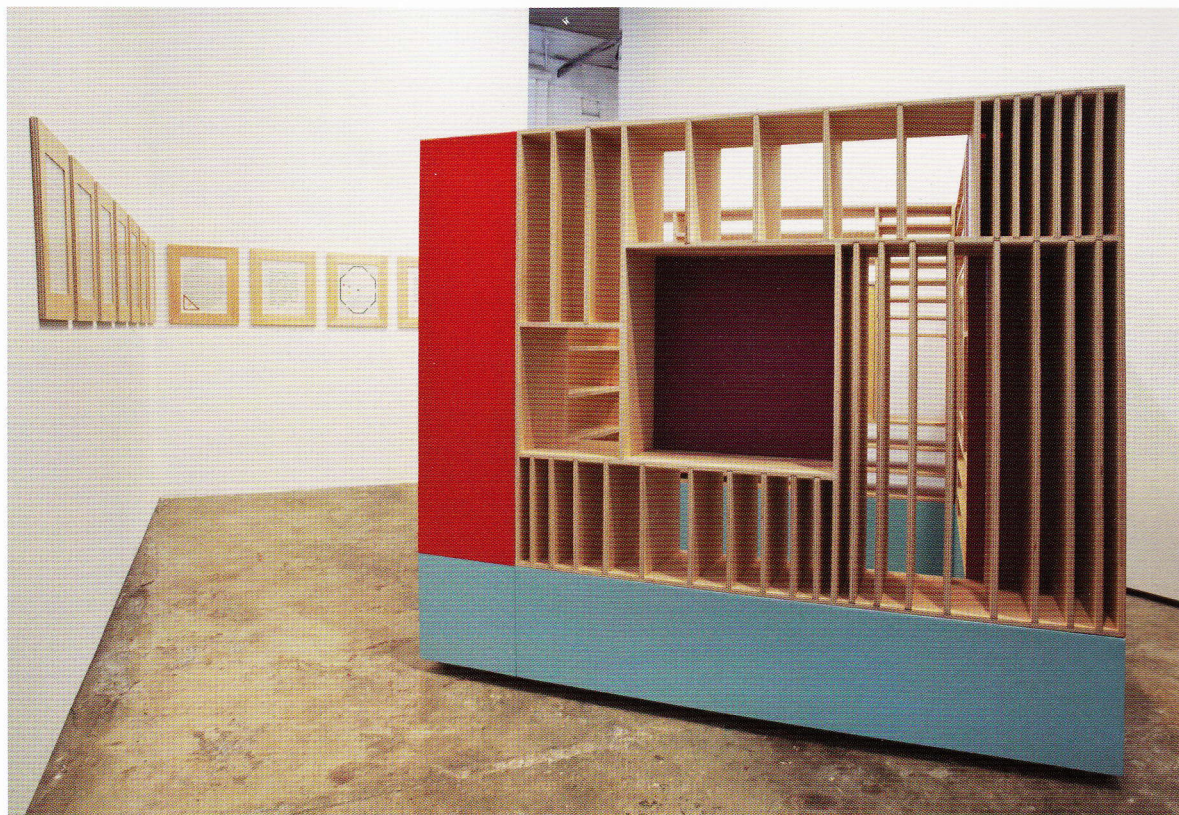
Hastings first defined what she makes as sculptural situations – 'sculptuations' – as early as 1996. As a sculptuation, her new ebook *Missing: four sculptuations by Gail Hastings* (2014) has been pronounced as: 'Actual art, not the documentation of art.'¹ With this in mind, I downloaded the ebook onto the requisite iPad, feeling the weight of the sculptuation in my hands, viewing her exquisite watercolours filling the screen and navigating her work's imagined spaces with a swipe. The experience is unique and entrancing. For example, in the first sculptuation titled *Corner caretakers*, the 'Encyclopaedia of taking care in art' begins: 'Forgotten, a corner caretaker awaits delivery of the upper left corner of the page.' The texts on subsequent pages begin with similarly serious adjectives: 'Diligent ...'; 'Alienated ...'; 'Steadfast ...' – ostensibly qualities of caretakers of art, or curators.

Hastings herself is experienced in the role of curating. In 2001 she selected artists for the tenth anniversary of the Museum of Contemporary Art's annual 'Primavera' exhibition of young Australian artists. Her own work was included in the inaugural 'Primavera' exhibition in 1992.

'Human events are dreamlike,' writes the art historian Richard Shiff in the foreword to *Missing*: '[T]o use Gail Hastings's term, our situation is a sculptuation, from which we negotiate a physical world and a conceptual world. The physical world is the sculptural; we can bump against it. The conceptual world is the situational; we imagine or formulate our situation in order to delineate a purpose in life and chart its prospects.'²

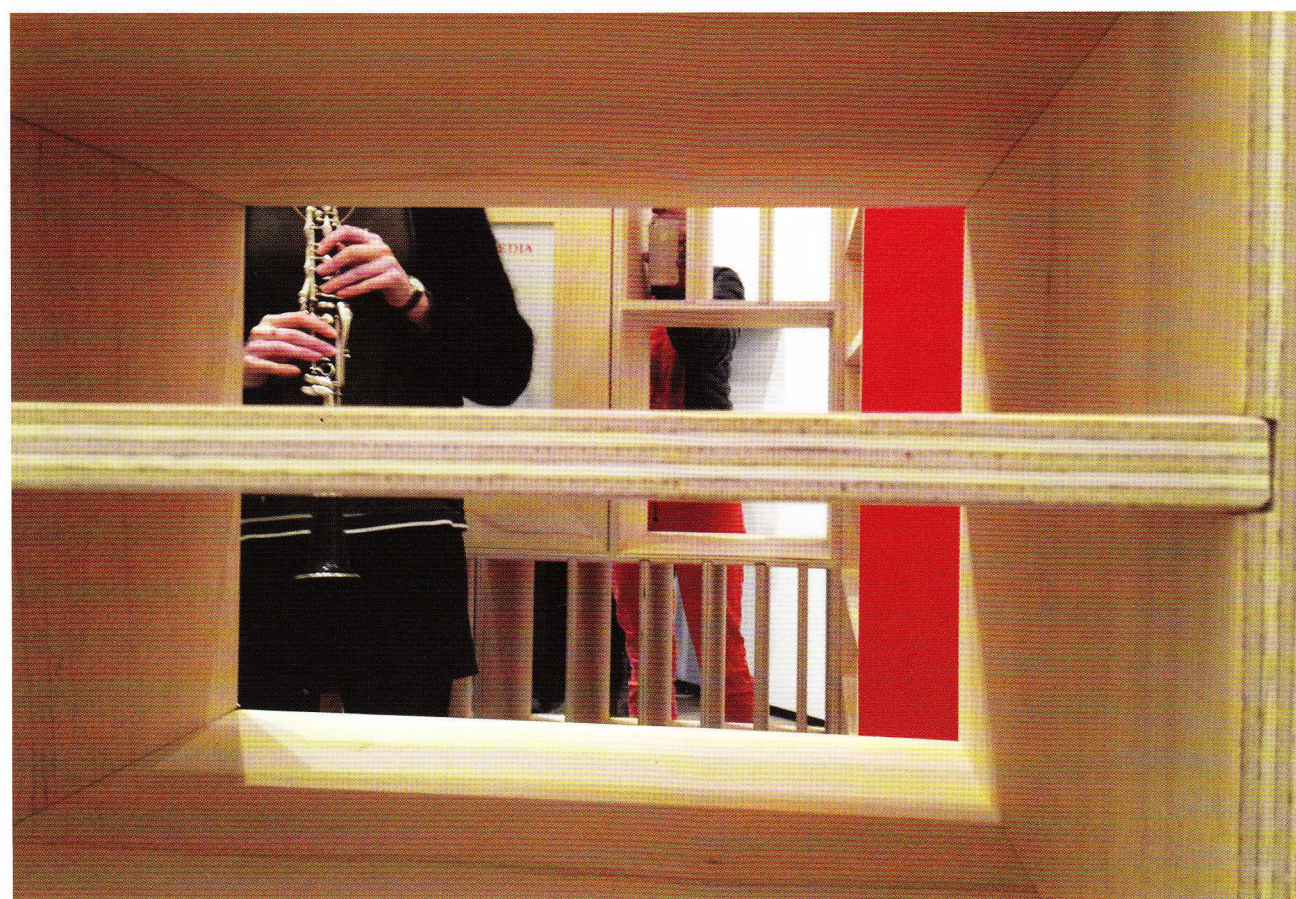
Built by the artist in her Sydney studio from 18mm plywood, Hastings's major large-scale work titled *Exhibition: To Do*, first presented at The Commercial in April this year, provides a more physical encounter than her ebook *Missing*. Positioned off-centre in the gallery and aligned on an east-west axis, it appeared and felt solid when it is, in fact, not solid, but made of rectangular units of space. From the outside, the overall height and breadth of the work and the slats of plywood that delineate each spatial unit bring to mind an elegant set of storage shelves – minus the objects intended to be held.

At the centre of each of the three larger upright structures is a square hollow. Embedded in its depths is a square block of colour that prevents us seeing through to the other side. It is deep violet, painted on wood. Stepping inside the square space at the centre of the work, we again encounter violet. This time, however, the colour is not a solid block of violet, but the opposite – a variegated saturation of translucent watercolour on paper. They are violet coloured squares aligned to the left of each painting; empty – bar one – of a tick that completes a 'to do' list item. We realise the solid block of colour seen from outside is the centre of a floor plan of the entire sculptuation. On the inside, it is the space within which the viewer stands.



Gail Hastings, Exhibition: To Do, 2014, installation view, showing (left wall) Corner caretakers and (centre floor) Exhibition: To Do, The Commercial, Sydney, 2014; image courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney; photo: Sofia Freeman

Gail Hastings, Exhibition: To Do, 2014, east looking west installation view, The Commercial, Sydney, 2014; image courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney; photo: Sofia Freeman



Gail Hastings, Exhibition: To Do, 2014, north wall watercolour detail; image courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney; photo: Sofia Freeman

Megan Clune playing Exhibition: To Do, performance view, The Commercial, Sydney, 3 May 2014; image courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Three watercolour floor plans make this correlation clearer. In each floor plan, we are orientated by an east entrance through which we actually walk, a physical and conceptual entry point. We find ourselves physically inside a sculptuation and conceptually hovering above it, looking down on its floor plan – in two places at once.

These contrasting perspectives in Hastings's sculptuation are, ironically, not unlike the complexity we experience in the daily space of life. In *Exhibition: To Do*, this aspect is made explicit in the way the sculptuation is brought into being through a 'to do' list that delineates 'a purpose in life' – that of making art for an exhibition. The items on this 'to do' list include: 'Surrender to an aesthetic necessity to make new art'; 'Be patient, breathe, make a cup of tea'; 'Test the necessity's audacity to survive the struggle'; 'Make the art for an upcoming exhibition'; 'Build racks in which to store the art after the exhibition' – all of which remain un-ticked except for the last. Hence the storage racks we see are minus the works of art they are built to store.

On the final afternoon of the first showing of *Exhibition: To Do* in May this year, the sculptuation's existence between solid and non-solid was rendered sonically through an intervention by clarinetist Megan Clune, who played the pattern of these oppositions as a musical score. As with all of Hastings's work, the score for this piece is conducted by a rationale. The floor plans of the three watercolours are composed of a grid of equally spaced lines. Some of these spaces are blocked in with blue. The solid blue stripes correlate with the slats of plywood that delineate the spatial units of the storage shelves. The space in between each plywood slat is, therefore, a multiple of the plywood's thickness.

For instance, in the floorplan/elevation described above, the top section comprises 11 multiples of space then one solid – repeated five times; then six multiples of space followed by one solid – repeated three times. When the clarinetist played this section from the outside, she played 11 counts of solid musical notes followed by one count of silence

– five times; then six counts of solid musical notes followed by one count of silence – three times.

When the clarinetist moved to the inside, she played the opposite. In this case, with this section, she remained silent for 11 counts before playing a note for one count – five times; then remained silent for six counts before playing a note for one count – three times.

From the graspable ebook sculptuation *Missing* to the recent large-scale *Exhibition: To Do*, proportion, scale and the articulation of an aesthetic space remain fundamental to Hastings's work. In the process, we can see how her work re-engages with Donald Judd and a history of minimal art, while it also points further back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the work of Russian constructivist Varvara Stepanova, and modernist architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin.

In her latest body of work, Hastings continues to broaden notions of two- and three-dimensional space, both perceived and experienced. These concerns are articulated through a highly original approach, supported by an aesthetic, conceptual rigour driven by an ever exploratory and constantly questioning intellect. Now extended beyond the gallery context to more accessible formats, such as a downloadable ebook, and embracing other creative forms such as music and sound, Hastings's sculptuations attest a practice and vision of singular quality.

1. Artist statement. See <http://gailhastings.com.au/missing/>, accessed 24 June 2014.

2. Richard Shiff, 'Foreword', *Missing: four sculptuations by Gail Hastings*, Pigment Publisher, Sydney, pp. 6–7.

Missing: four sculptuations by Gail Hastings is available on iBooks (AU\$16.99); Exhibition: To Do, together with two sculptuations from Missing, Corner caretakers (2014) and Space of a five page plot (2014), was presented at The Commercial, Sydney, from 11 April to 3 May 2014.