

THE COMMERCIAL

Mary Teague
Language of Art
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The Commercial Gallery, Sydney

Mary Teague's new exhibition *Language of Art* reconfigures the materials of structure and support and the artefacts of fictional events and performances as primary aesthetic objects. Posters, empty cardboard photo-mount frames, rope and wood armatures and other devices for presentation and display are foregrounded and enlarged beyond their usual dimensions. Although materially rich and allusive, these works delineate a certain absence at the core of artistic production; the spectator is drawn into, but denied a direct engagement with the artist. Like the so-called blank screen of psychoanalysis, Teague fashions empty containers to elicit the wished-for fantasy of the artist's virtuosity.

The relational aspects and interaction of found images, text and objects combined with impure invocations of late modernist abstraction and architecture are the foundation of Mary Teague's work. Another Magazine, from 2001, used pages sourced from the high-end fashion magazines dissected with repeated circular cutouts. The pieces were rearranged and attached to the wall by lengths and coils of rubber and over-sized elastic bands, giving the appearance of a deconstructed magazine rack. The circular excisions revealed particles of bodies and materials captured in a taut, hyper-aestheticized reverie totally devoid of human subjectivity. In her 2012 solo exhibition *Psychic Oasis*, large format reprinted family photographs collected from op-shops were embedded in a series of pseudo-expressionistic abstract paintings. In these works the interplay of image and abstraction activated narrative dimensions further hinted at in the titles - such as *Night Terror*, which featured a black and white photograph of a family home attached to an abstract backdrop of alternating lines bleeding in magenta and black pigment. The weird angles, darkened windows and figure of a man leaning on a balcony resonated with the bold slashes of color in the painting to create an atmosphere of foreboding. In *Device for Looking Forward*, a vintage photograph of a young boy posing in olde-worlde stocks was pasted over a messy abstract painting affixed to a plywood backing and framed by retro glass ashtrays. A wood structure wrapped around the sides and backing, supporting and grounding the painting to the floor and repeating the structure of entrapment depicted within.

Language of Art continues this reiteration of internal form and structure through works that inflate, magnify or pare back found material to reveal something more elemental. *Another Device* revisits *Device for looking forward* in a large wall sculpture suspended above a black stage like an oversized ornament. Thick ropes secure and festoon a heavy block of wood stained and marked like a painter's palette, and cordon a soft diamond shape with a collection of unfastened belts draped on the lower angle. The raw brutality of the painting at the center of this construction is counterbalanced by the slack ropes and belts, suggesting a conflation of masculine and feminine tensions. Taking this idea further, two smaller works, *Male and Female*, locate adjacent to *Another Device* on the wall and stage. Steel mounts are painted in a thick orange and olive mud. In the central voids, Teague has inserted rolls of corflute plated in 24-carat gold. A humble material associated with cheap signage and model making is made precious, but these hollow tubes still feel insubstantial – phallic trinkets to decorate the gallery. Similarly, the title piece *Language of Art*, is an empty triangle, constructed from painted steel brackets with more gold plated corflute insertions. The triangle, an essential form in traditional composition, is given sculptural volume in order to demarcate a blank section of wall.

Equivalence 1-7, comprises enlarged prints of vintage cardboard photo-mount frames yellowed and creased with age and arranged on a wall like a series of minimalist paintings. The absence of family photos focuses attention on the surface details of the frames, which take on an almost sculptural dimension. This effect is echoed in *Sculpture*, in which three parts of a Marshall guitar 'stack' are contained in separate stacked photographs given the illusion of weight through their positioning at the juncture of floor and wall. Like the empty stage, these elements declare their disassociation from an event or performance.

In *The Prairie*, posters taped to the inside and outside of the gallery roller-door combine images and text drawn from the artist's experience that read like a conversation between two people. The images use parallel formal devices seen elsewhere in the show: such as the inverted depiction of three friends on a park bench seen from behind, their joined hands forming a triangle, or the image of stacked tables with the text 'I want I want, Modern Lovers & Everyday Clothes' broken up in three sections contained by thick black lines recalling the structure of the stage. These posters embed the personal in the formal and the serial repetition of the advertisement further detaches the artist from her creation.

Language of Art is at once colder and more conceptual than it might seem - a deliberate subterfuge is at work despite the generous presentation and evocative source material. Teague invites us into the inner world of the artist, but in the end we are relegated to an encounter with the trimmings, borders and ephemera understood to be the 'language' of contemporary art.

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