

There's no time: John Spiteri, Mira Gojak, Bradd Westmoreland, Karl Wiebke

Opening remarks by Naomi Cass, director of the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne

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I am thinking about two things, both concerning process: what it is to make a work of art and what it is to make an exhibition. Clearly related: making art and exhibitions are usually parallel practices, sometimes dependent practices. Often the exhibition takes its lead from the art and reveals its story, at other times the exhibition forms a didactic armature around the art. Occasionally the exhibition takes the art on a wild ride around the curator's desires.

I am thinking that as an exhibition, *There's no time: John Spiteri, Mira Gojak, Bradd Westmoreland, Karl Wiebke* is in some respects more akin to making a work of art than crafting a thematic armature. I will tell you why I think this is so.

In her exhibition panel text, curator Bala Starr explains, 'each of the four artists employs creative processes and materials freely, and in this "era of art with labyrinthine rationales" their work conveys unusual openness'. This unusual openness is mirrored in the way Starr has gathered Spiteri, Gojak, Westmoreland and Wiebke. This is not a school or even a bunch of drinking partners, nor is this an essay about cause and effect, or an even-handed 'blancmange' of equal representation.

At the core of the show are 50 works produced over the last two decades by Sydney artist John Spiteri. In concert with this generous foregrounding of Spiteri are one, one and four works by Gojak, Westmoreland and Wiebke. Even-handedness has no place when exploring the felt enigmatic response we can have to art, a response that slips past our brain and enters our body. Particularly art that explores processes and materials, art that gives something over about the artist's decision-making, art that is critical thinking in sensuous form. Each artist seems to be saying *what happens when*, rather than declaring *this is about*.

Starr has intended to bring a relatively young and highly accomplished Sydney-based artist to Melbourne for his first major museum showing and builds a receptive context through introducing work by relatively well-known local artists, her selection driven by a deep respect for the work she shows and belief in the role of a university museum to open up new vistas into contemporary art. *There's no time* demonstrates that art grows anew in the presence of other art. To call unrelated works together under one roof, works that look and speak so differently is an intuitive, felt exercise on the part of the curator, one which takes the path of leading from Spiteri's work to *see where the exhibition goes*.

I now come from a world of photomedia, quite alien here. This is a world that in some respects is burdened by photography's indexical relationship to the material world. The ease with which a photograph can make a recognisable image has liberated the artist from the tiresome labour of representation but stripped the photographer of this rich and meaty domain.

I am struck by on one hand the level of invention that each artist demonstrates as well as the kinds of restrictions each artist has imposed upon their practice, restrictions that assist in distinguishing their practice. There are no fancy materials here: paint, wood, glass and canvas. Each artist has made something from *relatively* nothing. To quote Mira Gojak, 'to get materials like plastic sheet moulded would cost a fortune, whereas I just look at things that are kind of vaguely the right shape at Bunnings and go "OK". You just buy a cheaper version and you sort of manipulate it'. Gojak applies a systematic mechanical process of reducing the door to a kind of line drawing, reducing its function by cutting it up and turning it in upon itself in an ever decreasing circle but magically retaining its doorness. Dismembered, the door escapes into the world but, like someone who goes on a journey abroad to get away and unfortunately takes themselves with them, the door never really escapes.

Karl Wiebke speaks of the process he adopts as a way of making art in an anxiety-free manner. I understand this to mean that by radically reducing the things he might do, he creates what is now a well-trodden and effective path. Wiebke is therefore able to foreground his means of making: that pleasure that is the labour of painting. I believe Wiebke paints a flat ground and, starting in one corner, meticulously and carefully covers the surface with lines using a number one brush, leaving decisions to scale and colour only. The effect is quite breathtaking.

While I was not present during the three days Bradd Westmoreland painted this commissioned wall it seems evident that neither the process nor his joyous engagement with colour and paint have been diminished by working at this monumental scale. Indeed Westmoreland has simply made a small painting on a huge scale. As a painting it hasn't become sketchy like a drawing (thick paint) but it remains fresh, easeful and brimming with optimism.

Worried by the proportions of these galleries: this is only the third time an artist has played with the height of the room: Raafat Ishak, Stephen Bram; here there is an exhilarating diagonal from the piano, to the shooting star.

In contrast, this huge swathe of John Spiteri's work, domestic in scale grounds me in the languages and styles of now unfashionable twentieth-century art and interior design. Surrounded by the material culture of his family, Spiteri works with what is at hand, such as split rocks from the succulent garden to cedar recycled from furniture, transformed to tender and lyrical effect. Attuned to both the world around him, the ingenious make-do of a frugal home and to the history of high and minor arts, we can see his progress over 20 years of work. Commencing with his facility with French illustration and the optimism of the '50s and '60s to his more recent lyrical abstracted work. Antiquity (Grecian urns, attenuated figures) sits alongside surrealism (hands) and even gemmology, yet each seems to come via mid-century interior decoration on screens, fabrics and wallpapers.

If the artists here are saying *this is what happens when*, rather than declaring *this is about*, then I say here is the raison d'être of the exhibition and I declare *There's no time* open.