



*The Centre for the Study of Adhocracy: Producing singularities in a more and more standardised world, 2006. Installation detail. Image courtesy of the artist and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. Photograph John Brash.*

# GAME CHANGER:

HELEN JOHNSON

NEW PAINTERLY STRATEGIES | SHELLEY MCSPEDDEN

**H**ats Riddle (2010–11) portrays a scene in which four men, buried up to their necks in sand and provided with only the most limited information, must correctly guess the colour of a hat, that has been placed on their heads, in order to avoid execution at the hands of a merciless adjudicator. Those with a passion for mental gymnastics might recognise this popular brainteaser, variants of which are endlessly reproduced in the kind of puzzle books you would expect to find in a GP's waiting room or nestled in the bag of a regular public transport user. This ode to problem solving seems a fitting opener to 'System Preferences', a

recent exhibition by the Melbourne based artist Helen Johnson, as her *oeuvre* to date can be read as an ongoing concern with the thorny problems thrown up by painting, politics, and any intersection of the two.

Over the past decade, Johnson has established an idiosyncratic practice, resolutely committed to the questions of how aesthetics can best be utilised to engage with a broad range of contemporary social and political issues. She is known for her large scale tableaux painted on paper and attached directly onto walls or composite architectural armatures. Laden with symbolic imagery drawn from diverse visual and cultural sources, these scenes speak of the contradictions, binds and dilemmas faced by individuals attempting to establish a coherent political position amidst the messy minutiae of daily life in a late-capitalist society. Whilst some narratives seem drawn from life, for example that of a young man at his desk busily working on a campaign for biodiversity whilst basking in the warmth of an electric heater, others are more poetic in approach, such as an image of a man dreaming of himself as the astronaut Neil Armstrong, desperately attempting to erase his footprint from the lunar surface.



clockwise from top left: *Education Cuts*, 2011. Detail. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph Andrew Curtis; *Hats Riddle*, 2010-2011. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph Andrew Curtis; *Changing Silks (Rinehart, Forrest, Pratt)*, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph Andrew Curtis.

Having asserted a distinct preference for exploring social issues through the prism of the individual, it is somewhat surprising to find Johnson tackling political affairs on a macro level in 'System Preferences', a body of work that takes direct aim at the apparatus of contemporary Australian politics. A cast of prominent political power-brokers looms large within the exhibition, and includes politicians, media moguls and business tycoons, whose portraits are overlaid with allusions to magic tricks and parlour games. In one work we find Prime Minister Julia Gillard performing coin tricks whilst sandwiched between the industrialist Gerry Harvey and mining magnate Clive Palmer; in another Palmer's peers Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest join Anthony Pratt, heir to the Visy packaging empire, to perform routines with a magician's silks.

Whilst these motifs of cheap tricks and sleight of hand are an easy dig at the workings of Australian politics, what propels the exhibition beyond simple caricature is the way Johnson conceptualises the medium of painting as a coherent system to reckon with the structures of political power. Johnson signals this intent in the exhibition title, explaining, "System Preferences" refers most obviously to the control panel of the perniciously ubiquitous Macintosh, though it also refers to the systems of painting, and how they might be rethought in a contemporary context—and, on a broader level, how we might like things to be run [or] what systems we would like to see in place'.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson suggests that it is the unresolvable nature of painting that is one of its most productive characteristics. She argues, 'If it is, as a medium, an unsolvable problem, that, to me, is really exciting; the idea that the continual antagonism, declaration of death and of new levels of reinvention or purification of painting as a medium, can now be thought of in a broader sense, as part of the medium itself—this is an aspect of what you are committing to when you decide to make a painting, you are deploying, in some way, a sort of zombie medium—it is a system rather than simply a material medium'.<sup>2</sup> It is this concern with the metaphoric capacity of the medium as a whole that may explain Johnson's embrace of more traditional forms of painting in 'System Preferences', for it is the discrete painted canvas that most concisely evokes the historical discourses and debates that have raged about its status.

An array of painterly strategies, from abstraction through to figuration, are deployed to evoke allegorical parallels between the aesthetic and political realms in 'System Preferences'. The most patent example of this is in the portrayal of various players on the Australian political stage. Whilst those with leading parts, such as former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, or Australian defence advisor, Professor Hugh White, are defined with razor sharp definition, those allotted only meagre roles, including ordinary citizens lined up at a polling booth, are flattened out and simplified.

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This visual conceit is explored further in an accompanying series of enigmatic abstract paintings that deny their audience any clear visual reference point. *Education Cuts* (2011), for example, is a curious work that oscillates between flat planes of colour and eruptions of splintered patterning. The painting is permeated with the suggestion of violence but we are left to extrapolate the specifics. Does this work speak of a hostile protest provoked by proposed budgetary cuts or perhaps the systemic cultural fracturing such fiscal measures enact? These kinds of works are calculated exercises in ambiguity. Johnson explains, 'I have intentionally abstracted them to a point of unreadability, so any meaning that might be derived from them is, in all likelihood, nothing to do with their actual basis; so they are representing that pro-

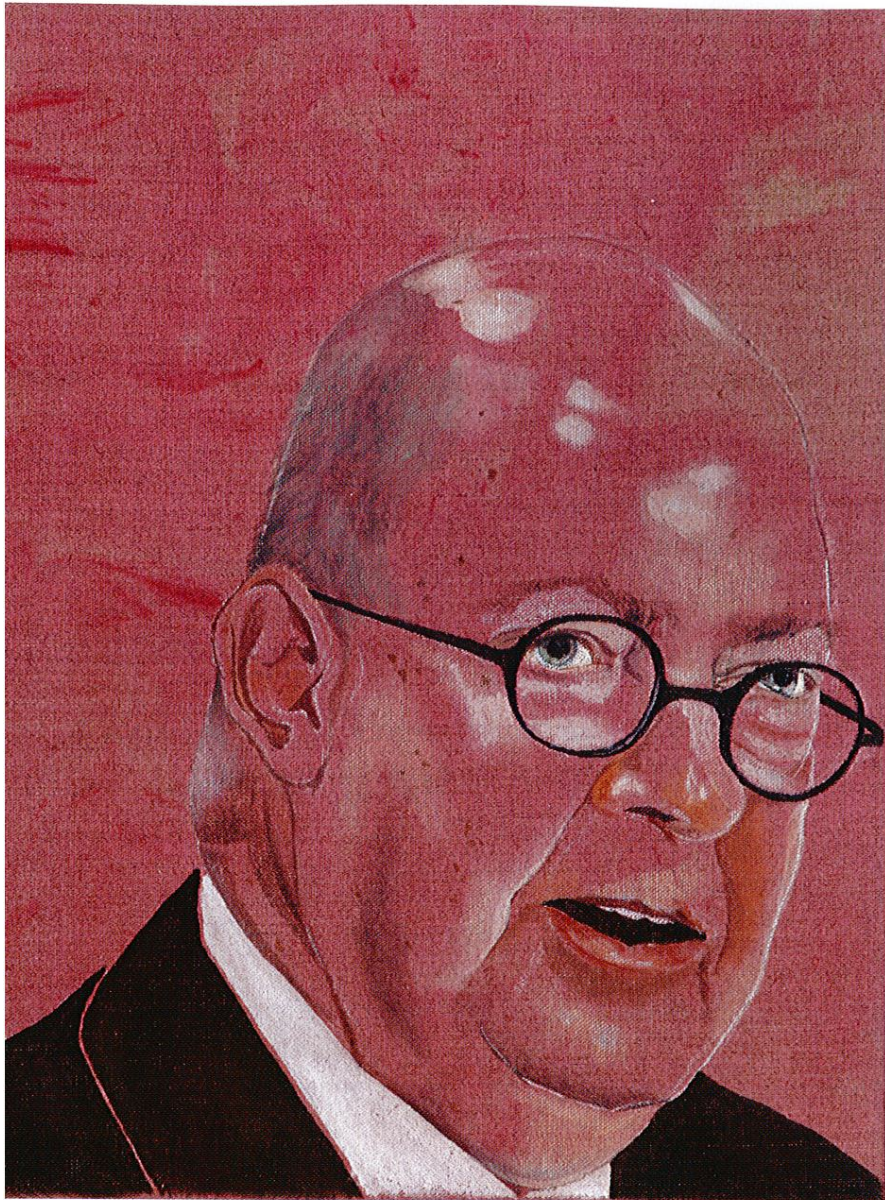
cess, I guess, of misapprehension and reinterpretation that is so crucial to knowledge production and cultural production'.<sup>3</sup>

An assortment of fabric veils hung throughout 'System Preferences' literalise these themes of obfuscation and distortion, prohibiting any possibility of viewing the exhibition as a whole. This activation of the spatial dimensions of the show is part of Johnson's ongoing investigation into material resonance within her practice. In her early wallpaper works, such as *The Centre for the Study of Adhocracy: Producing singularities in a more and more standardised world*, (2005-06), a major installation shown as part of the 'NEW06' exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, in 2006, the life-size scale, decorative details and seamless application to supporting walls, craftily recalled community murals from the 1970s. More recently, in her exhibition 'On the Make' (2009), Johnson's elaborate use of supporting structures, including concrete blocks, archive boxes and cabling cord, evoked the mechanisms of socio-cultural construction and scaffolding.

'System Preferences' exhibits some of Johnson's most pointed spatial metaphors to-date. The aforementioned *Education Cuts* is hung from an ominous black shroud in the far corner of the exhibition space, its face forlornly turned to the wall, a clear allusion to the collective shame this neglected debate ought to inspire. A handful of the drapes in the show are fashioned with large pockets, positioned just above eye level, that conspicuously conceal paintings enveloped inside their folds, hinting at the secret deals and covert political manoeuvring that have become common practice in contemporary governance.



from left: *A Current Affair*, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph Andrew Curtis; *On The Make*, 2009. Installation views. Image courtesy the artist.



However, it is in an isolated portrait of Kim Williams, long serving Chief Executive of FOXTEL, masked by a lilac veil hanging only a few feet from its surface, that one of the less defined but crucial themes of the exhibition is exposed—the shadowy but all pervasive political influence of the media industry. When we look around the exhibition once more we find that everything presented, from the stilted and awkwardly placed figures within the portraits, to the origins of the more abstract works, has been gleaned from media imagery. It is the interplay between what is portrayed and what is concealed in ‘System Preferences’ that speaks so eloquently of the way political discourses are invariably filtered through the lens of the media.

In one of the final works of the exhibition, *A Current Affair* (2011), a sublime landscape is inferred by subtle tonal shifts of ink on linen and a luminous full moon threatens to seduce us into a dreaming stupor. With its lucid reference to that long running staple of Australian television, the painting seems to emulate the hypnotising effect of mainstream media, with its relentless focus on fad diets, faulty speed cameras and celebrity scandals. Crystallising the concerns of the exhibition more broadly, it gently calls us to resist the alluring distractions and distortions we continually face and proposes that it is only when we step back and consider the political terrain as a whole that we will be able to gain some clarity and make our preferences count. ■

#### Notes

1. Helen Johnson, *Paradoxes, Perversities, Corporate Sponsorship and Historical Baggage*, artist’s talk, Monash University, Melbourne, 25 May 2011.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

Shelley McSpedden is an Assistant Lecturer and PhD candidate in the Theory Program, Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University, Melbourne.

Helen Johnson, ‘System Preferences’, was held at Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 2 – 25 June 2011.



from top: Kim Williams, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph Andrew Curtis; *System Preferences*, 2011. Installation view. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Photograph Andrew Curtis.