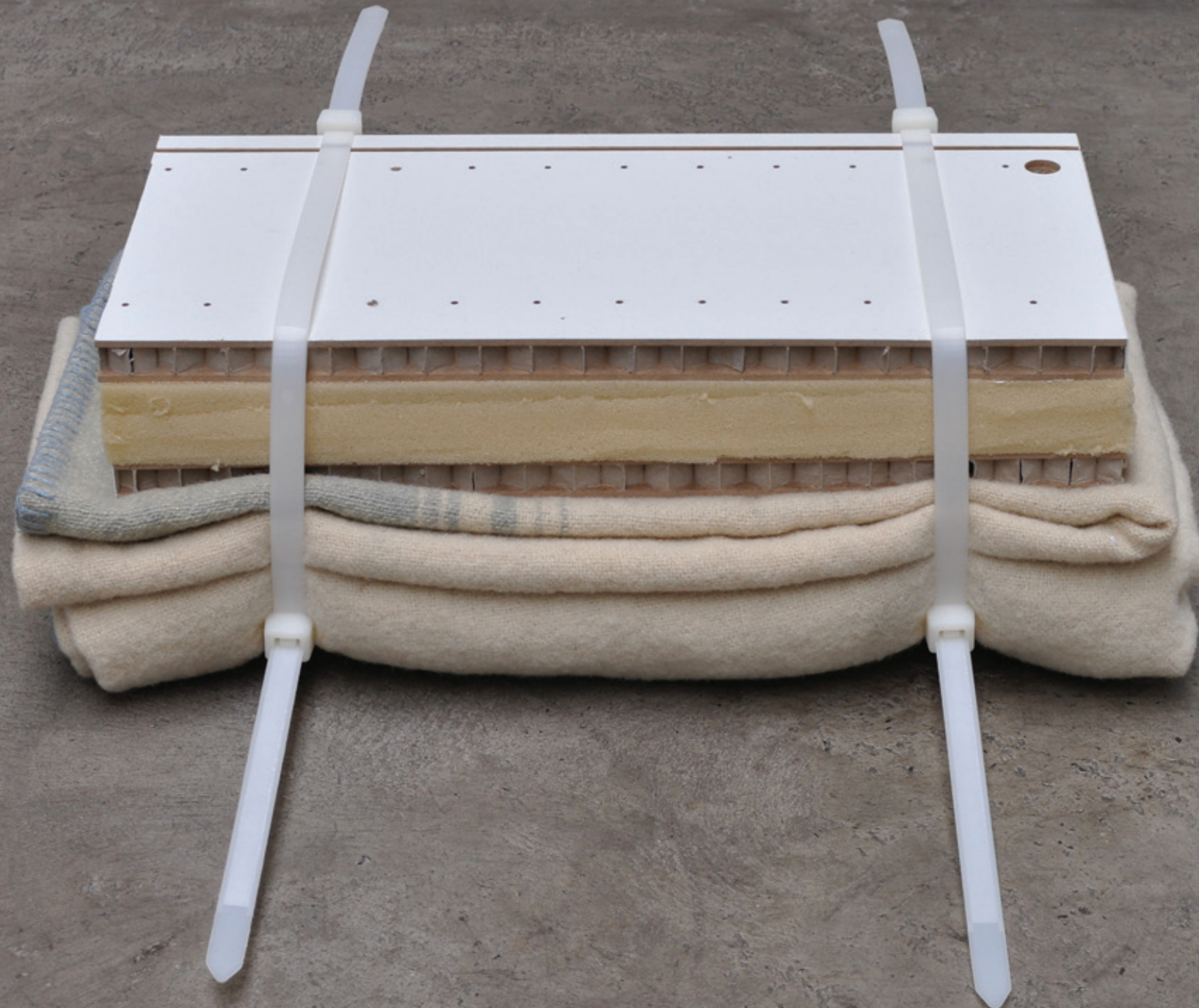


NOR FOR NOUGHT
BRENDAN EARLEY & KEVIN COSGROVE

SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER



Brendan Earley *They bedded down for the night* Woolen blanket, foam, plastic ties, melamine 16 x 61 x 47 cm 2011

KEVIN COSGROVE AND BRENDAN EARLEY: DOUBLE OR NOTHING

How might one compile a manual for the assembly of an exhibition? A general inventory of the various components, the arrangement of said parts in order of installation, instructions on how each piece corresponds and interconnects with its partners, and a final diagram illustrating the finished product, with each object in perfect alignment and working order. If only it was that easy. An exhibition, after all, invites a near-endless range of possibilities, of potential exhibitions, that evades such definitive solutions. Instead, it could mean slotting piece A into section F, or C, or the duplicate of A (more on this later), and sacrificing the overriding 'meaning' of the exhibition to a new, unpredictable collision of disparate parts. In the case of the two-person show, it becomes less a simultaneous display of works bearing a formal or conceptual affinity, than a conversation, an exchange of points of view. While offering a rigorous demonstration of each artist's respective practice, the exhibition also enacts a discourse, of argument or agreement, of mutual understanding or steadfast difference.

In *Nor for Nought*, the works of Brendan Earley and Kevin Cosgrove reveal a number of shared interests; materiality, the do-it-yourself ethos, the tension between surface and underlying structure and, of course, the interaction of constituent parts in the assembly of a 'finished' work. Not that it ever attains such a finish. Rather, objects appear in a state of transition, tentatively strapped together with plastic ties or through the depiction of a garage full of disassembled pieces. In both Cosgrove's paintings and Earley's sculptural composites, there is a sense of the provisional, of customising and finding practical solutions. A concern with the functional object, removed from its initial intent and placed in a new arrangement that emphasises its form, cuts across both artists' practices. *Workshop (with cardboard)*, Cosgrove's image of an inert car engine exposed and extracted from its chassis, enmeshes the central item in a painterly conglomeration: a cloth littered with bolts and pieces, the glimpse of an angular, rust-coated shelving unit on the left-hand corner, the eponymous sheet of cardboard thrown over the top of the machinery (and across the canvas). The engine still serves a function, albeit within the painting rather than the automobile. Likewise, Earley's assortment of layered fluorescent tubes, foam and 'reassembled IKEA kitchen unit' entitled *The Lights Are On*, re-packages readymade components to an alternative effect. Their seemingly casual organisation along with the acknowledgement of the 'kitchen's' provenance, suggests a form of assembly gone wildly off-manual. '...but nobody's home' is the obvious conclusion to its title, and in this subversion of the objects' initial functions, the sculpture displaces familiar ideas of domesticity. Instead, splayed across the gallery floor, one sees the re-making of the practical into the strangely aesthetic.

This distinction finds additional elaboration in Earley's use of materials, which juxtaposes the veneer of prefabricated surfaces with mass-produced commodities and aluminium casts of styrofoam packaging inserts. In *Pieces of the city are forming like islands* (2010), a stepladder serves as a support or plinth to a construction of plasterboard and 'styrofoam' (replicated in metal). Here, Earley employs a type of 'coding' whereby the functional aspects of an

electrician's ladder (insulated against shock) produce poetic connotations of protectiveness and isolation. Similarly, *Don't look back* (2010) melds together elements of mahogany, perspex and aluminium to create a seamless and formally geometric composition, even as its title might warn against modernist ideas of 'medium-specificity'. The transparency of materials gives way to deception, to a mix-and-match of simulated and synthetic elements. Such works demonstrate that even functional objects carry their own formal designs that often, in their blatant artificiality, paradoxically imply 'authenticity' (like the 'wood grain' effect of wall paneling). The dialectic is exemplified in Adorno's suggestion that "only when countless standardised commodities project, for the sake of profit, the illusion of being unique, does the idea take shape, as their antithesis yet in keeping with the same criteria, that the non-reproducible is the truly genuine."¹ One might go even further, to propose that, with the proliferation of prefabricated materials, the notion of 'uniqueness' is projected onto labour itself. Regardless of uniformity, a consumer is nevertheless encouraged to look proudly at his newly-assembled IKEA wardrobe and say: "I made that."

While one would hardly suggest that Cosgrove's work shares the indistinguishable ubiquity of the prefab kit, there is a sense of repetition in both the consistent subject matter of his paintings and their exhibition following a previous solo show at *mother's tankstation*.² While redolent of that exhibition's themes and illustrative of his own interest in labour and productivity (he's spoken of painting the same image twice in a row, as a sort of "anti-compositional" technique),³ the sudden shift in context, existing alongside Earley's sculptures, encourages a re-reading of his work.⁴ The paintings speak 'of' labour even as Earley integrates it in the subtle associations of his chosen materials. Yet, there is a shared notion of activity as meaningful in itself, regardless of the product. Cosgrove's scenes of various workshops and garages appear uncommitted to a specific craft, and unlikely to result in a functioning object. In *Workshop (Red Car)* (2010), an automobile teeters at the edge of the frame, a mass of vibrant crimson amidst dull grey tools and walls. Its position as a formal component within a larger composition is allied with the presence of a jack, holding up the rear of the car and, of course, rendering it immobile. Stripped of utility, the 'objectness' of the vehicle takes priority over its usefulness. Similarly, the lack of any actual labour taking place and the unfinished status of the title object might point to a shift in work practices towards self-employment, flexibility and amateurism (as opposed to assembly-line productivity).⁵

One also notices how each artist approaches the notion of labour through materiality in two specific works: Cosgrove's painting *Workshop Wall (Compressor)* (2010) and *They bedded down for the night* (2011), Earley's composite of folded blankets and melamine (a resin used in Formica) bound with plastic ties. Each offers a very different take on 'compression': Cosgrove through the portrayal of the machinery in question, which, in its title, has already been picked out from the detritus of the garage; Earley in the actual incorporation of diverse materials into a discrete object (that his materials also include synthetic compounds introduces yet another 'layer') and the wider association of the blanket as a protective device.⁶ And yet, in both cases, compression indicates a tactic of artistic production, the



Brendan Earley *Don't look back* Aluminium, perspex, mahogany 148 x 52 x 13 cm 2010
Kevin Cosgrove *Workshop (with cardboard)* Oil on linen 45 x 55 cm 2011
Brendan Earley *They bedded down for the night* Woollen blanket, foam, plastic ties, melamine 16 x 61 x 47 cm 2011

ways in which objects or media are pulled together and integrated. In Cosgrove's paintings, the various bits and pieces of the workshop are concentrated in a single composition, in an orderly representation of laborious disorder, while Earley's assemblage of distinct materials is literally strapped together, their individual associations and functions embedded in a single, sculptural form.

Not for nothing, then, is the exhibition entitled *Nor for Nought*. The phrase bears a pleasing phonetic echo in the twinning of the negatives, a resonance that suggests a near-symmetrical duality, as if in (almost) perfect agreement. However, as in Earley's coding of specific materials and their practical functions, the title's biblical origins underscore the significance of labour itself in both artists' practices: "Nor for nought did we eat your bread, but we earned it with productive and meaningful purpose."⁷ Engaged in their respective tasks, they nevertheless allow themselves the opportunities to converse, to remark and comment upon one another's work, and it is here, where their individual paths converge, that one notes the intriguing possibilities of joining piece A with slot X.

Chris Clarke

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F. Jephcott (London:Verso, 2005) p. 155

² See the previous essay in this publication

³ From a conversation with the artist, June 11, 2011

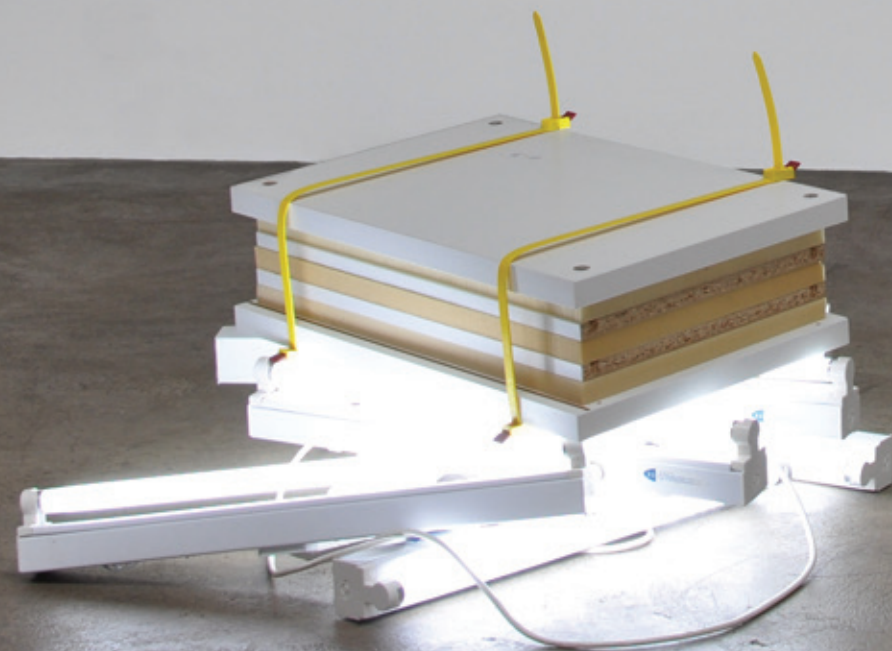
⁴ It is also worth noting that the artists had previously been shown together in a two-person exhibition at LISTE 10, Basel, 2010. This 'conversation' is, in this sense, an ongoing one.

⁵ Cosgrove's relationship to Photorealist painting, both stylistically and in use of photographic source materials, captures this moment: "we are left with the intriguing paradox of Photorealism's definite investment in notions of craft and the artisanal production of images, on the one hand, and its move to chronicle precisely those early years of post-manual, post-craft, post-industrial, post-Fordist, post-production on the other." Dieter Roelstraete, 'Modernism, Postmodernism and Gleam: On the Photorealist Work Ethic', *Afterall* 24, Summer 2010, p. 9

⁶ Earley's title may also imply a connection here between sleep and Freudian condensation in dream analysis, where multiple elements and symbols are compressed into a single dream-object.

⁷ Thessalonians 3:8, quoted in the exhibition press release





Kevin Cosgrove *Workshop Wall (compressor)* Oil on linen 40 x 50 cm 2010
Kevin Cosgrove *Yellow Workshop* Oil on linen 40 x 50 cm 2010
Brendan Earley *The lights are on Reassembled IKEA kitchen, plastic ties, foam, florescent tubes* 100 x 100 x 50 cm 2011
Kevin Cosgrove *Workshop (Red Car)* Oil on linen 40 x 50 cm 2010