

mother's annual 2017

Alasdair McLuckie *The Birth of Form*

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In 1626, native North Americans sold the island of Manhattan to Dutch settlers for twenty-four dollar's worth of glass beads: so goes the story, in any case. A small modicum of research determines the myth as pure fabrication, passed second-hand from generation to generation so as to grant credence to the colonisers' claim to what would later become 'New Amsterdam'. But, despite the paltry sum – particularly in contrast to Manhattan now, where a square foot of land typically costs thousands – the ingenuity of the Dutch was more than matched by their trade partners: the Canarsee tribe, who by most accounts did not reside on the island and were simply passing through on their way from Long Island. Being non-residents, they were of course more than happy to take Dutch payment for lands they did not own. Despite this narrativial snag, however, the "beads and trinkets" myth persists, guided through time by a series of historical paintings that ostensibly represent this momentous deal.

A 1939 depiction of the scene, painted by an unknown artist, shows a group of barely clothed native Americans sitting and standing in bemusement; to the middle of the foreground, two fully clothed Dutch settlers peddle their wares to the apparent chief, who stands before them, arms folded in an admixture of wariness and lassitude. One of the settlers is pulling out a length of lustrous red cloth from a stuffed wooden casket that sits on the beach; the other man gesticulates towards the cloth with overcooked enthusiasm. To me, this exemplifies the complicity of images – and particularly, of western painting – in the perpetuation of various, destructive myths: primarily, that the native population was so taken with western accoutrements that they *deserved* to be disenfranchised; and, implicitly, that Western colonialism and brutality was in fact not only justified, but necessary in the name or guise of civilising *progress*. Consequently, simple beads – despite both natural beads' rich history in Native American craft, and the fact that in reality the purchase of Manhattan involved other, more practical materials – have themselves become othered, loaded, cast through the lens of Western supremacy; paternalism, even. They have become symbolic both of the apparent necessity, the "understand-ability" of western colonialism, and of the brutal opportunism of the West.

In this contemporary context, the term 'cultural appropriation' has exploded in popularity in the last ten years or so; alongside 'intersectionality',ⁱ the term enforces a set of worthwhile restraints on the act of cultural representation. One notable, recent example is the case of the painter Dana Schutz, who was charged with the former in her depiction of Emmett Till lying in his open casket, grossly disfigured by the hands of the white racists who had falsely accused him of some minor slight. Schutz, a white woman, was said to have co-opted the representational apparatus from the people of colour who possessed and deserved it, in the crude interests of profit.ⁱⁱ Representing others and their cultures, and in particular those who suffer discrimination by dint of not being white, is now a complex and arguably foolhardy task; before, it was surely too transparent, subsumed in the unquestioned voracity of artistic freedom. Taking on the task of any kind of cultural appropriation – which essentially means using the iconography of one cultural grouping in another, either in cynical, opportunistic or simply clueless, synthesis – is certainly not for the faint-hearted.

As a result of the potency of these contemporary ideas, it could be seen as 'problematic' for a white, male Australian artist, to make art that so heavily references the traditional craft of North American and other indigenous cultures. However, what is most marked when I look at the work of Alasdair McLuckie, and in particular those collected in his exhibition *The Birth of Form* at mother's tankstation, is that I do not initially think of any of these things; I am trained to see *through* images, to grant the two-dimensional picture plane the self-sufficient privilege specific to "capital-A" art. This privilege was also, of course, the condition of Western modernism, and modernist painting in particular: think of Picasso's *Demiselles d'Avignon* (1907), for example, or Gauguin's romanticised depictions of the Tahitian idyll. Their appropriation was historically justified, perhaps most famously, by MOMA curator Alfred Barr's 1936 diagram of modernist art,ⁱⁱⁱ in which he used these 'primitive' influences to naturalise and justify the predominance of American painterly abstraction. Modernist artists explicitly sought out the 'primitive', determining in the forms and processes of non-Western art a means of expanding the canon of Western

art; and as such, of propelling it forward. Cast through a contemporary lens, such strategies problematise the founding narrative of modern, and even postmodern, art; addressing this now, though well intentioned, is akin to rearranging the furniture without fixing the foundations.

McLuckie's work is a modernist appropriation of the primitive, but one cast, unavoidably, through the self-awareness of postmodernism; and it is in this uncomfortable historical and semantic gap – from modernism, to the postmodern contemporary – that these works so successfully inhabit. Playing on western self-consciousness and indeed complicity, it does not succumb to either: this is where we, the viewer come in. The body of work comprising *The Birth of Form*, is at least initially simple in appearance: twenty glass seed-beaded tableaus, each reiterating a simple, striking geometric form and – aside from the opening work, which hangs alone in the gallery's entrance – these are arranged in composite groups of four and five across four walls. Up close, the detail to each is startling, each bead being individually woven and subsequently attached to a woollen or linen 'canvas-type' support. There are surely thousands of constituent beads to each panel, every one threaded by hand, by McLuckie, on a traditional form of loom, based on a small native American version collected by his father, a keen amateur anthropologist. The central recurring form is abstract and glitchy; but to me it resembles a kind of pipe, like René Magritte's^{iv}, here fatter, more top-heavy and without any linguistic appendage; towards the background of each work, a pattern of zigzags, some inverted, put me in the mind of repetitious Op Art, or the primal, unapologetic lines of Cubism. And, traversing the gallery, it is this grasping towards Western art-historical meaning – rather than, say, Native American history – that is most apparent. Rather than refer back to their traditional origin, we cite the white artists who appropriated them, now lionised – quite literally, as in McLuckie's earlier collages of Picasso, a lion's head where the painter's should be^v – in the canon of art. McLuckie's aesthetically seductive works inhabit this unease, beautifully.

As befits craft, in the works here there is little attempt at traditional mimesis, no attempt to move beyond the limitations of two-dimensionality. Western painting, by contrast, traditionally strove towards the representation of something, only to later disband that project altogether, in modernism (this is where primitivism became productive). In craft, instead, the act of material negotiation, of physically *making*, generates its own particular rhythms and meanings. In cultures around the world, this act of making can be seen to give rise to particular forms; and, as McLuckie noticed, some of these forms recur on a global level – in particular the 'brick stitch' method of weaving, through which all of the works here are made. This method has repercussions for what can and cannot be represented, with certain forms appealing in unison to hand, process, and eye. As a result, there is little gap to distinguish making and representing, no gap between idea and its transmission: like a möbius strip, we struggle to discern where one begins, and the other takes off. McLuckie's works function similarly, with the forms arising from his intuition of his mediums: wool, thread, beads, canvas, the 'brick stitch,' and of course the loom. In these mediums' global recurrence, furthermore, *The Birth of Form* cannot be strictly confined to any one local vocabulary. In this form of making, the flows of postmodernism appear almost anticipated, but with the caveat that such globalism is, first and foremost, one of the material processes, rather than immaterial, informational flows. Shared tropes speak of an unthinking communality that is global and uncanny.

As an aesthetic device, repetition is likely most associated with postmodernism: the 'Pictures' generation; Warhol, and so forth. However, what McLuckie shows us here is that the meaning connoted by repetition is one separable from cynicism, irony, or exhaustion; it can be joyful, even. In indigenous cultures, repetition is one mode of accessing the absolute, of getting beyond representation itself towards greater and more universal meaning. At least initially, repetition is key to the work here, as despite being handmade, only small differences separate the twenty works. Colours shift, that's true: the stretched dyed wool planar surfaces, atop of which the beads are stitched, take a variety of forms – from fluorescent yellow, to black, to crimson, to herringbone brown. In some, the wool's natural hue is left inviolate. Within the flat picture plane, the beads' colours also change; whilst the zigzag pattern switches from left, to right facing. Nonetheless, and though they are beautiful objects by themselves, it is a different experience to read any one alone: instead, what appears important is the unity that each one, individually, seems to prefigure. Despite their small and not-so-small distinctions, the works might be read as a sequence, a circular and organic whole, clues regarding its composition picked up from one work, to the next. The titles, too, reaffirm a particular sense of natural circularity. Each of the twenty works is subtitled 'Birth of Form/,' each followed by a linguistic coda of varying length. The first, which we see as soon as we close the gallery door behind us, is called 'Birth of Form/Cut Your Teeth'; each of

the others, which include 'Birth of Form/A Tragic for Magic' and 'Birth of Form/Jealous Lord,' is marked in its self-determination from the work it refers to. These titles resemble the products of a kind of linguistic mark-making, a way of using language that aspires to use language against itself, to playfully create a system of linguistic self-mythologisation that seeks to get past language altogether; this being said, the titles could simply reiterate, in language, the instinctive use of materials embodied in the works themselves.

In a short story named 'Lovers,' the Argentine writer Silvina Ocampo describes the awkward minutiae of a relationship that only ever took place in winter, reawakened at intervals as though from a trance. These meetings always assumed ritualistic form: a park bench, eating four, different and delicious cakes, then the retreat towards a blanket the girl would bring folded, without fail, under her arm. Through these small, familiar gestures, the lovers realigned their love, putting themselves back, in continuity, alongside all their other meetings, past and future tense; 'The repetition of these movements,' as Ocampo so beautifully put it, 'put them in touch with eternity'.

^{vi} It seems to me that McLuckie's work, and in particular the gestures he employs, function similarly: they mean that his work is always-already historical due to the fact that it is always in conversation with previous iterations of it; the act of making, repetitious as it is, grants it a historicity, a ground, that *embodies*, rather than represents, the passing of time. A *séance*, a conjuring, McLuckie's material incantations point to another, less publicised problem of representation more broadly: why represent anything when you can represent time itself?

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ⁱ Deriving from feminist work, and the work of Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) in particular, intersectionality is best surmised from the acknowledgement of positioning within society ('privilege'); and an examination of how and why such differences occur, either through race, gender, sexuality, etc.

ⁱⁱ The artist Hannah Black was the first to make this claim, demanding in an open letter to the curators of the 2017 Whitney Biennale, where *Open Casket* (2016) hung, to have it destroyed. Other artists came out in favour of Schutz, most notably the artist Coco Fusco ('Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till,' *Hyperallergic*, 27 March 2017). Schutz has been determined in response that the work never was or never will be, for sale:

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/10/why-dana-schutz-painted-emmett-till>

ⁱⁱⁱ Barr made the diagram as an accompaniment to the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, which took place at MOMA that same year. The chart presents a comprehensive family tree of the different schools of art – including 'Negro sculpture' and Japanese prints' – but key to the chart is the affirmation of *progression* with regard to artistic practice. Read from top to bottom, the diagram charts modern art's inevitable culmination in non-geometrical and geometrical, abstract art.

^{iv} *The Treachery of Images* (1929)

^v These collages are included in his 2012, *Study for Blue* series, and his solo project for LISTE, Basel, June 2015:

<http://www.motherstankstation.com/exhibition/liste-20/>

^{vi} Silvina Ocampo, *Leopoldina's Dream* (Ontario: Penguin, 1988) p. 10