

Aide-Mémoire

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On the wall next to the bed – right about where a 5-year old’s gaze would meet the plaster – a small section had been patiently worked away. Through this tiny portal was another world, accessible only in sleep; a hole large enough that the child could work his entire body into it and the land beyond. Other memories remain, abstracted by the passing of time: the enamel of an old biscuit tin, the cool darkness of my grandparent’s hallway, and the fragrant warmth of the old dog’s fur as he lay in the sun.

Memory is a strange place. The further we go back the more intense the memories become even as they assume the resonance of a dream. The uncertainty of their content adds a certain melancholy to the recollection – they can be richly savoured for how they connect us to the past, yet often they’re filled with sadness because they represent experiences which can never be fully revisited.

Michelle Cawthorn uses memories of her life, childhood and relationships to produce a quietly beautiful body of work that not only connects the artist to her past, but also brings those memories into the present in solid form . Her drawings feature finely detailed line work and crosshatching that are the result of a meditative studio practice. They are created through many hours of work, Cawthorn carefully and methodically calculating a design, balancing elements and line weight until the final drawing is arrived at, as if, like a sculptor working in stone, the form was always present within just waiting to be revealed.

Cawthorn’s drawings represent a process of careful deliberation, but they’re also emotionally charged for the artist as she works through the sometimes-painful memories of recent personal loss such as the death of her mother. For the viewer, this connection isn’t readily apparent, nor is it meant to be, but there is something in

the biomorphic shapes and lines that suggest an *aide-mémoire*, richly evocative but abstract.

Accompanying these drawings are Cawthorn's collages that feature a mix of drawn elements and images from a hardback book on birds. The birds are from Australia and elsewhere, lifted from the context of avian classification; lifted too from the purely illustrative nature of their original intention. Cawthorn approaches the bird forms with the same open and intuitive process she uses to create her drawings, but where those drawings are resolutely abstract, the collage's figurative elements create flow of association between what they represent, and how they have been transformed.

There's an intriguing level of complexity in the relationship between representation and idea – in one sense we recognise the collage elements for what they are, and understand the process without really having to think about it, but from another perspective the collage elements represent several layers of process between artwork and source material: a real, living bird is observed and described, an illustration is created based on those descriptions and observations, then that illustration is transformed on to a printed page, then, finally, the removal of the illustration from the book and its placement into Cawthorn's collage.

It's not such a huge leap from this process and into another evocative metaphor for memory, particularly the way memory feels 'layered' – built up from fragments and associations, reordered and presented in the mind as a single thing. Like her drawings, Cawthorn's collages make solid something ghostly and ephemeral, personal yet also universal.

A common childhood experience provides the inspiration for Cawthorn's sculptures: the temporary cubby house built in a lounge room, a fortress of cushions, chairs, blankets or sheets, a place where children can declare independence from the world of adults. In Cawthorn's sculptures and installations, the transitory and temporary nature of the cubby takes on a new and sometimes-solid form, the play of light

through soft fabrics the inspiration for their hard patterned surfaces, their shape and size strangely familiar but always slipping away.

For Cawthorn, the examination of memory as a subject and as a source of inspiration for her art opens up something intensely personal to public interpretation, but crucially, her work is also evidence of someone who is aware that memory always slips away, becomes reconstructed and altered, the psychological and emotional importance of those 'new' memories not lessened by the change, but actually heightened. Her work explores both literal and symbolic forms that are evocative of childhood, but also translate universally. The emotional resonance between the strands of work – the drawings, collages and sculptures – produce the final meaning of the body of work, not so much something that has a conclusion, but something that is an open enquiry.

It has been argued that the way someone makes art is the way that they experience the world; the choices an artist makes in how they depict the world is representative of how they actually cognitively perceive it. This proposes a complex relationship between the subjectivities of artist and audience. If you had ever wondered what could be truly shared between people through art, Cawthorn's work is, in a very real sense, a communion of ideas and emotions between that most seemingly ephemeral of experiences – shared memories of time past.

From another perspective, Cawthorn's work, both the process of making and the outcome we see in the gallery, produces a different kind of meaning. Some neurobiologists believe that long term memories are reinvigorated and reinforced by associated actions in the present. Many of us have had the experience of revisiting sites of our childhood, old houses that we lived in, the school we attended or perhaps just a street we often walked along as children. That revisiting brings back the memories in ways that feel much stronger than simply trying to recollect a place or feeling. In Cawthorn's practice the work is the enigmatic result of her way of communing with the strongest of emotions and memories. They no longer fade, but return stronger than ever.

