

FLIPPER BUMPER HIGH SCORES: Michelle Cawthorn's Sensuous Symbolism

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There's a thought experiment that goes something like this: imagine that the universe was created 10 minutes ago, including your memories of everything before 10 minutes ago. There is simply no way to argue your way around that idea. No picture, work of art, no personal memory is authentic – it has all been created just a few moments ago. It's a terrifying thought because we need some verifiable evidence of the past to keep us tethered to our sense of who we are.

Our values, desires, and even our sense of self are predicated on the memories of past selves, sometimes traumatic memories, other times as treasured recollections, but the foundation of our present identity is made up of shadows of the past. Michelle Cawthorn's work is drawn from real and invented memories, a synthesis of creative association and materials that produce sensuous and beautiful objects.

Cawthorn has explored foundational memories of early childhood traced through the materials of her work. Where, for example, she recalled the simple pleasures of building lounge room cubbies, her abstracted, sculptural works of hanging and tied fabrics included the kinds of materials present in her sense memories from those times, the plaid prints, cotton sheets and chenille quilts of the hallway linen closet. In a related way, her drawings and collages explore form and line, shapes and figures that refuse to coalesce into definitive meanings, instead remaining like a childhood daydream of unlimited possibility.

As children, everything in our imaginations is ego-centred; everything is connected back to the self, as though the world was created just for us. As a child, Cawthorn discovered that the 'Pinball Number Count' segment on the classic TV kids' show *Sesame Street* would sometimes include the number 12, which coincidentally, is the date of Cawthorn's birthday. She would intently re-watch the segment wondering when 12 would reappear, and when it did, she felt a

special sense of connection: they're talking about me... To add to the wonder of that discovery, Cawthorn has vivid memories of the film montage used to illustrate the number, 12 trips through 12 famous American national parks, an association that she has carried into adulthood. These memories and associations serve as the foundation for the latest work.

In Cawthorn's large works on paper, such as in the *Bumper* series, large flowing shapes suggest the *fleur de lys*, the stylised lily motif, images that are rich in sexual symbolism, the being a flower long associated in shape with female genitalia, while the central, rounded shape is suggestively phallic, the meeting of male and female. The bumper of the title is a part of a pinball machine that repels the steel playing ball and which, with proper manipulation of the flippers to aim the ball back at the bumpers, can produce high scores. Cawthorn's drawings evoke a symbolism of female desire, where machine and organic material melds into something other, a new thing produced by the accumulation of lines and patterns, shadow and space, in images that skirt the edge of recognisability.

Cawthorn's early collage pieces used found materials such as wallpaper and wrapping paper in combination with recognisable drawn elements such as human figures, aircraft, and graphic elements such as thought bubbles. Her floor sculptures, using drawn and painted on marine ply, were carefully constructed to appear to be casually grouped two dimensional surfaces, and extended the artist's penchant for the parabolic plane curve into three dimensional space. With the soft sculptures of her hanging fabrics, Cawthorn's work is extraordinarily sensitive to materials, each evoking a different response, but continuous within the overall aesthetic of her work.

In her bird collages, Cawthorn evokes something else. Using the lines and form of the birds' bodies, Cawthorn carefully matches together their wings and heads, beaks and feathers, producing hybrid creatures. On first glance the images seem complete and almost logical, but on a second look their unutterable strangeness creates a kind of sensory shock. Classic collage work has always played at this edge of recognisability, crafting a clash of worlds, say between machine parts

and the human, but Cawthorn's collages, produced in her studio on the edge of bush and echoed with birdcall, the surprise here is the uncanniness of like and like, rearranged into something new, a visual expression of an aural experience. The effort to understand ourselves is based in memory, and the recognition of our desires, partly in the space of sleep, but also in the way those desires are sublimated into our everyday lives. Cawthorn's work resists the fear that memories of the real world can slip away, and take on the spectral quality of a dream. She reinvests memory with the material quality of the present, abstracted perhaps, but alive to the senses.