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frame and reference
Contemporary art in South East UK

Concrete and clay / Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan



Cara Courage is beguiled by Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan's joint exhibition *What About Sunday?*

As *What about Sunday?* is located in Milton Keynes, reflections on Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan's work and collaboration cannot help but also be located in the particular space and place of the town. Milton Keynes has an architecture that challenges questions of the nature of human interaction in the urban realm, and so does the exhibition. After travelling through a desolate Milton Keynes on a cold morning, seeing only a handful of people on the streets, on the buses and in the marketplaces, the gallery environment and work throws the visitor into a reflection on the city and how we exist in it.

On entering the gallery, visitors are met with the site of upturned Christmas trees hung from the ceiling (*Instant Sculpture*, Hattan, 2009/2013), a video of a snowman (*Snowhau*, Bächli and Hattan, 2003) sledging, beneath them. It is this salvo of nature and play that makes one reflect on the environment just left – the concrete grid that is Milton Keynes, where life seemingly takes place behind closed doors, in office buildings and shopping malls, not in the streets. Where is nature? Where is the human?

But with Hattan's *Béton Liquide* (2000–2012) – film representation of urban life of the city – here now is the life that one expects to see on city streets. These are films of people going about their business – a workman carrying a MDF board – of children playing – a girl spinning on one foot – and of people simply milling – a woman shifting from foot to foot whilst standing. The shots are in close frame, and short in length; this is a forensic look at the mundane, of the small moments in the day, the inconsequential given attention. Half of the screens are faced to the boulevard (for one cannot call the streets of Milton Keynes' streets' in the conventional sense of the urban environment) which begs the question, is this to draw people in to the gallery like any shop window display, or is this to give life to the city? There is a sonorous Tarzan call too from a loud speaker outside the gallery (*The Great Yell*, Hattan, 2005), analogous to a call to prayer, to gather people out from behind their doors and to this place.



Lampshade by Eric Hattan, photo Andy Keate

The exhibition casts a gaze on the material that shapes the infrastructure of life. *Roots* (Hattan 2013) is the 'what lies beneath' of our urbanised existence, of the infrastructure and the people that maintain it, for it is homage to Hattan's electrician father. A lamppost is side-turned, balanced across a stairwell and hangs out into the gallery, disorientating in its scale by its presentation. A block of concrete, dusted with earth is at the base end, this manmade object more like an uprooted tree again, again a musing on the presence of nature in the urban.



Midsummer by Silvia Bächli, photo Andy Keate

A lamppost is least hinted at too in Bächli's *Midsummer* (2012) and its large scale oil pastel, *Dandelions*, which, whilst a literal titling of a depiction of stems and seed buds, could equally be an urban form – likened by the MK Gallery to the lampposts of Milton Keynes. Nature and the urban in connection again.

The matter of daily life is the theme of the work presented in the Middle Gallery. Peeled potatoes (*De l'obscurité au supermarché* Hattan 1994/2103) and inside-out food packaging (*Boy Band* Hattan, 2005) are deified: "look, a bag is

famous!" said a boy walking past *Boy Band*, a brown paper bag presented on a stand. The attention to detail and reverence to this infrastructure of consumption both strips the items bare of meaning and lifts them above the commonplace.

In contrast to the overtly painstaking creation of this work of Hattan's (as seen in the film component of *Boy Band*, of its making) in the adjoining room, the presentation of Bächli's paper work could not be more different. The Long Gallery, with a collection of tables, a projection box in untreated wood and a simplistic display of gouache, ink and oil pastel work, is a serene space where one feels one can move freely. Not only do Bächli's brush strokes mirror this feeling of flow but they are a direct manifestation of the human in the show, sensing the artist's hand as real, visceral. This spontaneity of movement is a contrast to the deliberated hands of Hattan in *Boy Band*. As with Hattan's *Round and Round*(2000–2012) and in *Caravan MK*(1996/2013), a caravan situated in the gallery square with a peephole to its domestic interior, the viewer is given the space to respond with their own human narrative. Bächli's abstract but explicitly handmade images allow the same kind of emotive connection. The images feel at once intuitively familiar but also unknown, ambiguous, and ascribed meaning has to be sought out.



The gallery space is amplified constantly by Hattan's further video works in the Cube Gallery. A lilting melody plays over *Round and Round*, a collection of films where the night-time city is given natural, playful characteristics akin to *Béton Liquide*, punctured to the point of aggravation by *(Yes I) Can*(2012), the sound of an empty drink can in the wind. This later is jarring, harsh to hear and in its unrelenting attention seeking, the viewer ponders where peace can be found in the urban lived experience. The shrill can noise is a disruption to the repeat of '*Round and Round*' image and sound; the can stops momentarily and respite is found, only for it to start again. The noise of the can resonates throughout the gallery; one cannot escape it, a constant reminder of the repetition of routine.

Bächli's *Dark Drawings*(1994–1995) are presented here in sympathy with both the night-time and the abstract in Hattan's films, but the apposition is unconvincing. It feels as if they have been placed here out of convenience rather than because of a real relationship to the newer film installation.

The collage work of *I do the DIY, you do the decorating*(Bächli and Hattan 1994–1999) is the most palpably collaborative in representation beyond the placing of work in sympathetic situ to each other. The analogy of a game of 'consequences' given by the gallery is apposite here; Bächli and Hattan have snugly placed drawings and photographs consequentially, the work of one running into the work of the other, a conjoined creativity. There is a feeling of a process of exploration, play, of happenstance.

It is with these two presentations of work and the indication of a creative working relationship that the nature of collaboration as human interaction is most provoked. Is there a natural run-on from one to the other? Are the artists same but different? The exhibition as sole and joint presentation of work spanning many years revisited anew postulates on the nature of the collaborative in art.

The varying degree of the interaction between the two artists questions what is a prerequisite of artistic collaboration and how this process can be in process and in final outcome – is this a free-flowing collaboration or, as the images have been deliberately placed next to each other, is the collaboration forced? But does this matter? The viewer has been asked to think on the nature of human interaction, does it matter to what degree this happens organically or happens to a prescribed set of rules or expectations?

What about Sunday? is an exhibition of connections; of the prosaic, of the urban, the natural and of the artistic endeavour. Human life is presented as routine and unrelentingly repetitive but inherently connected in space and place. Hattan's films of everyday life, Bächli's hidden moments of life, both situated in the human in the stark urban design of Milton Keynes, engenders an appreciation of the beauty of life and its micro concerns. There is something mysterious, elusive, in the show, a peeking into the work itself and into human stories, which is at one and the same time revealed and hidden.

What About Sunday, MK Gallery Milton Keynes 18 January 2013 – 31 March 2013