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Cutting Fields collage in the 21st century

Curated by Jasper Knight

Naomi Evans, Chris Firmstone, Clemens Habicht,
Chris Hanrahan, Jasper Knight, Alex Lawler, Mel O'Callaghan,
Stephanie Smiedt, Bianca Spender, Nick Tory

First Draft Gallery, Surry Hills
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With the advent of collage, cutting and pasting became a hallmark of 20th century modernism. From Picasso to William Burroughs to DJ Shadow, artists have been inspired by the play of recombination – by the possibilities of finding, cutting and rejoining materials from the surrounding culture. As the rising paradigm of digital media production, 'cut-and-paste' techniques have been renewed and have spread across a myriad of art forms, from Hip-Hop to hypertext, from film to fashion. But the art of the blade is not only about recycling, irony and iconoclasm – it can be a tool of creation.

The audio sampling in Chris Hanrahan's installation *Two-faced Half-truths* uses cut-together phrases across six distinct audio channels that merge and loop in an inescapable, failed conversation. Hanrahan turns the ironic weapon of cut-and-paste upon the raw materials of his own practice. Six 'two-faced' alter egos – drawn from mass media sources and combined like the "exquisite corpses" of the famous Surrealist game – mumble phrases from the artist's previous text works.

Mel O'Callaghan's *The Fallen (1) and (2)* recall the intersecting planes of constructivist design, by now an icon of early modernity. O'Callaghan's work speaks to constructivism's use of the graphic space as modeling ground for the re-colonisation of 3-dimensional space by new, pure forms. Here the architectonic low-relief hints at the model's capacity to multiply and occupy three dimensions. Similarly, Chris Firmstone's paintings on laser-cut aluminium present the 2-dimensional object in its 3-dimensionality. Trained in geometric abstraction, Firmstone produces carefully designed depth-within-flatness, with the work constantly oscillating between two and three dimensions.

Stephanie Smiedt's *Nike* series brings fine art materials – including Belgian linen and a variety of paint types – into play with more contemporary techniques and media. Smiedt's approach shows how the work of art is an inescapably historical assemblage; the modernist mode of collage is trapped alongside the archaisms of art historical materiality.

Clemens Habicht produces elegant collages with gouache detailing. The lone figure seems to be oppressed and denuded by the negative space from which it emerges. Based on a sequence of animation cels designed for a music video, Habicht's *Numb* series is finely suspended between life drawing and digital aesthetics, exposing the tension, inherent in animation, between the manual and the digital. Nick Tory's expertise in retouching and rendering (as a post-production technician and designer for Hollywood films) is put to poetic ends in his digital video work, *Fade*. Inspired by the mnemonic potential of postcards and snapshots, these remnants of remembered places are brought to life through subtle animation. These and other filmic gestures bring the still image into an elusive dance with the conventions of the cinema.

Jasper Knight's *Dino* also draws on memory and techniques of reduction to produce an uncanny presence in the corner of the gallery. Knight's work is based on a child's D.I.Y. model kit. By enlarging the toy stegosaurus to near-life size, the artist has restored the fossil to life. Yet at the same time, he minimizes the beast, stripping it to its barest architecture, aping its timelessness with ephemeral materials.

Nowhere are the stages of modeling more critical – or more distinct – than in the fashion industry, where the model precedes the real. For Bianca Spender, a fashion



designer by trade, the art of cutting is tightly interwoven with commercial process. Her *Draped Neck Coat* is cut from one piece of cloth using traditional draping techniques. The graded, life-sized Lectra print serves as an information system – a set of coded commands steering the design from drawing board to cutting room, and beyond.

Alex Lawler's *The Love Gun* is a deconstruction of pattern and ornamentation, in an oversize assemblage of the famed Kalashnikov Assault Rifle. Lawler's work invites a collision between the aesthetics of bourgeois domesticity and the iconoclastic legacy of Marxist activism. 1960s counterculture meets Pop in a marriage between the symbolism of resistance and the era's household expressions of prosperity. Naomi Evans's *Grotto* installation features a Gothic arch and gables created from black plastic garbage bags. Referencing Federation-style architecture the work is a playful critique of the 'aspirational' middle class penchant for the trappings of historical respectability. The aesthetics of gentrification are recast with a grunge-inspired repurposing of the suburban everyday – plastic garbage bags. Built-to-last architectural elements are imitated and detoured in today's disposable materials.

Cutting Fields shows that both cutting and pasting have deep histories, in ritual, folk arts, craft and design traditions. These artists, from diverse professional backgrounds, map the traditions of cutting into the 21st century, exploring the paths between drawing and sculpture, collage and installation, the tensions between object and image.

Photography by Jai Odell

Above: Cutting Fields, installation view, Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney.
Front left: Chris Firmstone, *Red and Green Rocks*, 2006, acrylic on aluminium.
Front right: Nicholas Tory, *Fade*, 2006, digital video