



Alasdair McLuckie: Modernism on Gertrude

interview by Naima Morelli

In his studio at Gertrude Contemporary, Alasdair McLuckie has finally found some peace. As I followed the artist up the stairs leading to his studio, he recalled the period when he was working from his home in Fitzroy, attending openings every night.

“It was fun, but that lifestyle was definitely exhausting. You just live twenty four hours a day. That was too much and I needed breathing space. I really like to work here, in this studio, being part of this Gertrude Street community. I feel really connected and I can meet other artists. I’m in the middle of what’s going on, but then it is also kind of nine-to-five. At the end of the day you can go home and not feel the need to be there all the time.”

Walking around the studio, the artist’s favourite palette of deep blue, orange, saffron yellow, pink, pale violet, grey, black and mustard green is evident. Alasdair himself wears a long red beard and a deep blue shirt that has a pattern of similar colours, confirming for me the old adage that artists often start to resemble their own art. He shows me some notebooks that are orderly disposed on a table. Many of his collages, prints and drawings are collected in these notebooks, which are meant to be browsed through. “In the notebooks there is a sort of inherent narrative in the simple fact that one page comes after another,” he says. “I like them as objects. For me it’s also a structure to begin with and build on.”

Alasdair’s love for paper isn’t exhausted in artist books. It also goes into creating grid-based sculptures and collages. Altogether, the object-filled room reflects an interest in primitive art and cultures, which Alasdair inherited from his father. It is through tribal art that the artist discovered modernism.



Alasdair McLuckie
Modern Love, 2013, inkjet on paper, 48 x 33 cm



Alasdair McLuckie
Untitled, 2014, woven and embroidered glass seed beads on found fabric mounted on wood, 50 cm diameter

For me Alasdair's work represents the widespread approach of young Australian artists towards European art history. In his work Alasdair is definitely postmodern. He takes inputs from art history and foreign cultures at face value, for their aesthetics alone. He talks of modernism as a mythology, rather than referencing the concepts and impact it has on art history. Alasdair sees modernism as an update of tribal art, and for his own practice he sources from both Picasso and North America Indian culture with the same modalities.

While Alasdair shows me a series of collages on his table, I am struck by the order and the cleanliness of his work. In one series of collages he has juxtaposed the head of a lion and a tiger onto old photographs. In another collage I recognise Picasso and Brigitte Bardot...

In this series you decided to use the lion and the tiger, what do they represent?

A.M. I'm not sure what they represent, apart the fact that as a kid I associated the lion with the male and tiger with the female. But that's just a random association, I mean, there was not much thinking involved. In art school I was interested in this sort of primitive folk art and not at all in a Western art history trajectory. I had been working up to then without that mythology, and I focused instead on storytelling. Then about two years ago I got to a point when I discovered Western history by myself, and modernism in particular, like Matisse, Picasso, all those guys...

Modernism was heavily influenced by the so-called tribal art of the day after all...

A.M. Yes, and I was really excited to find that. Modernism is almost an updated version of that sort of mythology.

Where does your interest for primitivism and folk art come from?

A.M. My dad is an architect, and he had an inexplicable interest in history and drawing because he was a creative himself. He was really interested in primitive art too. In his travels to London, when he was younger, he bought primitive objects and brought them back to Australia. It was easier to do that back then. So he had a small collection of precious little things that I grew up with. I think I inherited that interest and that's where my bead work comes from. My dad was trying to learn as much as he could about

primitive art, in particular North America Indian arts, which is in large part bead work. At one point he taught himself how to loom, and so when I was in art school I asked him to teach me how to work with those materials, because I found them beautiful. Needless to say, he was very happy to do it. That's why my art practice has no basis in history or ancient cultures. It's this sort of weirdly private thing.

So for your work you don't source from any culture in particular?

A.M. Well, I mean, you have to acknowledge that beads, as a material, are loaded, so I cannot just enter into a culture without acknowledging it. But in my work I tend to engage more with the concept of ritual, because the beading process is ritualistic and repetitive. I'm just engaging at a really formal level. I'm more interested in the aesthetic and the beauty of the material, so in my work you can find a completely abstract pattern that isn't referencing anything in the past. It's completely made up. That's how I deal with a culture, by embracing and celebrating the materials, the process and a particular style. That, and also the fact that for me these cultures are part of my own story. So that's where I come from.

Do you have the same approach when it comes to using different media?

A.M. I always tend to be meticulous. Because of this meticulousness each project makes a step toward the next one. With the beads you almost get fed up working for such a long time with such a repetitive process. The more I work on the beads the more I want to go back to drawing. And then with the drawing ...it's a different process, but because it becomes again such a meticulous process, eventually I will get up to a point when I don't want to draw anymore either. So, okay, back to collage! Then it gets to a point where I have enough of that and go back to the beadwork. To have this bigger studio has been an interesting experience. Here I can more directly have the space and the time I need to work on the beads one day, and return the next day to work on the drawing. In a small space I simply didn't have room to accommodate having that many projects on the go.



What about your three-dimensional modernist sculptures?

A.M. That was a Picassoesque series of just ten drawings on paper. I wanted to engage with that modernist aesthetic and push it a little bit further. Mostly I was inspired by this beautiful recycled paper that I've found for the prints. Because it was card, it opened up the potential of expanding what I was doing with the drawings. I like the idea of a three-dimensional surface to create a sculpture that sort of stands up by itself, occupying space. As soon as I did the first sculpture and stood it up, it felt interesting sharing the space with this sort of weird character. But I've only been working on them for a couple of weeks so I'm not sure about their final form.

In your collages the gridded paper underneath is visible. Is that a way for you to expose the bones of the work?

A.M. I see the collage work as a way to break up the meticulous nature that is pretty much inherent in how I work. Because I was much more spontaneous in the process, the grid came about

Alasdair McLuckie
Sculpture People, 2013, 42 x 30 x 5 cm

in order to put down a structure to work on. With the collage I got all the pieces from the start. I put down a piece of paper and then I figure out what shape or colour is most appropriate to put next to it. It's literally just responding to each move that I make. In a way that's what I do with the drawings as well. I work with a very basic grid structure. I create a nose, eyes, mouth, and a really broad shape for the head, then it's more about just making lines and responding from one move to the other.

As you said earlier, you discovered modernism by yourself. Didn't you study that in art school?

A.M. I did study modernism year after year in school, but I just wasn't interested, you know? Looking back at all the institutions that educated me I think I always have been lazy and kind of not interested in learning. I always think that if I could go back and be re-taught the things that they tried to teach me then, I would be in a place where I would be much more open. Learning is an active exercise and back then I wasn't interested in participating. It wasn't for lack of trying, it's just that I switched it off, like, it's not relevant to me, I don't care. I mean, I find that interesting too, having to learn modernism by myself and get to that point where I discovered how much it's relevant and ties in.

I guess at the time you didn't see how modernism could have something to do with your artistic practice...

A.M. Yes, and now for some reason I have found that something made two thousand years earlier by some other culture on another continent is incredibly relevant to me. Modernism still has a huge visual impact and there is a reason why it's so prominent in art today. It's crazy to think you can't be engaged, it's impossible not to be engaged.

Does living in Melbourne influence your work at all?

A.M. Well, I think it has to, consciously or unconsciously, in terms of personal history and interests. The one thing I was conscious of is that I made this series of drawings responding to my discovery of modernism and falling in love with Picasso and his work. That has been in part fuelled by the fact that the National Gallery of Victoria has a Picasso painting. I still find it incredible that I'm able to walk down the street and go and see it in the flesh. I find it the most beautiful painting that Picasso did at that time. It's really interesting that it is precisely the one that is the most accessible and also part of the Melbourne identity and psychology. I ended up finding it in almost all Picasso's catalogues to be one of the most beautiful paintings of his. Being in this studio you are both in contact with the art scene and you have your quiet little corner.

Do you reckon it's important for an artist to keep on being engaged with art scene?

A.M. I think it's important. I mean, it has its place, you know. I think it would be hard to completely remove yourself from the scene, unless you are already established enough to maintain contacts simply by necessity. I have a commercial gallery, so I feel I've done enough to entrench myself. I think it arrives at a point where you sort of step out from that social aspect, but you have to have roots planted. So, yeah, there is something to the social scene, but most of all I believe that if you are doing beautiful work, that is going to penetrate. Melbourne is not a huge city, so word of mouth can go around quite easily. If you know someone you probably are one or two steps removed from knowing someone you should know, or you want to know. Good work is going to permeate. If you are doing amazing art and you actively apply for shows and opportunities, people won't ignore it.

Alasdair McLuckie is represented by mother's tankstation, Dublin and Murray White Room, Melbourne. Artist site – alasdairmcluckie.com

Naima Morelli is a freelance arts writer and journalist with a particular interest in contemporary art from Italy, the Asia Pacific region and art in a global context. She is also an independent curator focusing on Italian, Indonesian and Australian emerging artists. At the moment she is working on a book about contemporary art in Indonesia.