

KATHERINE HATTAM'S *INNOCENT WORKS*

by *Sophie Cunningham*

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If Katherine Hattam's paintings were books – rather than art works that incorporated them – there would be long and fairly boring discussions within publishing houses about the unusual and arresting sizes of her work. It would be considered 'out of format'. By which I mean not a standard size A (small) or B (classic paperback – most of the books within Hattam's art are Bs) or the larger C format. Would the fact that her work looks good 'face out' be enough compensation for the difficulties in fitting her onto a standard bookshop shelf? There would be consternation about titles like 'Fiction/Non-Fiction' and 'Index'? – 'Well, which is it? Fiction or non-fiction? An index to what?' – All of which is why it could be argued that the text, covers and spines of the books Hattam uses in her art are well free of publishers and their restrictive and limited notion of meaning. That Hattam gives books back to us, cuts them free from their moorings, and allows them to talk to us of many things.

Hattam once told me she had been accused of 'wasting books' because she dissembled them – by which I mean cut them up – but it seems to me that in giving us books in parts she returns to us their symbolic meaning. Usually, when we talk of books, we talk about their content: whether we like what is said between its covers; whether it's well written. Hattam's paintings don't ignore content – how could you choose a spine that reads 'Vile Bodies' and not be aware of the force of language? – but the context in which she places pieces of books allows them an iconographic force that is quite separate from the words on their pages.

Think of beach and country houses you have loved. Houses full of low bookshelves lined with the (often) commercial fiction of generations: Agatha Christie in the 1920s, Ross MacDonal in the 1960s, Michael Connelly now. The spines tend to have been faded by the sun and there is sand between their pages. They smell musty. Their pages are mottled and yellow. 'Foxed' is the word for this combination of age and damp.



These books speak to us of people: relaxing, perhaps, after a long walk on a hot day. Academic siblings reading Mills and Boon because they 'just want to know what people like to read'. Grandparents who claim only to like books with 'facts in them' indulging in a little Patricia Highsmith. Cousins who protest they are 'too dumb to read books' sitting down to a bit of Freud when no one is watching. There is a real intimacy in watching people read.

The book spines that Hattam has used in some of her works do many things at once: they provide a vertical slash to anchor a painting with a broad horizon, they evoke Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh. There is certainly a lot of Freud in Hattam's work and it can't just be because those blue spines provide a striking contrast to the fuscias we see in some of her newer paintings; provides the counterpoint to paintings in orange and pink; a touchpoint to the paintings in blue and green. All her book spines echo or highlight trunks of trees, trees that are made out of pages of paperbacks. The book is returned to its source.

The works in this exhibition use fewer spines than some of her recent works have. The book's work here is more textual: indexes, body pages, content pages, all have a particular arrangement of shapes and rhythms. The paper itself absorbs the paints Hattam uses softening the impact of larger blocks of colour. Hattam has tended towards pages printed on the paper-stock called Tam Creamy, a paper that yellows slightly over the years, and has a rough porousness. I have always – as Hattam seems to – preferred it to Art Stock which is a shinier, whiter, heavier paper, that allows for better reproduction of photos and illustrations. Publishers tend to think that Tam Creamy is best used for words only. Hattam has found its purpose in art: less stable than other papers it gives the paint in some of these works a dynamic life.

Hattam told me that the first of the books she used in her art were books from her mother's extensive collection. I don't know what Freud would say about such reformulation of a mother's possessions – especially a collection that speaks of such a keen interest in psychology – into art. Things inherited – including talents and relationships – are clearly on Hattam's mind and two years ago she held a show, in conjunction with her son, the artist Will Mackinnon, in which she used

unfinished pieces of her father's paintings in her own work. William called his contribution to the exhibition 'Cut and Paste'. Hattam called her contribution 'Not Anxious?'.

Books are not the only subject of Hattam's fascination. Her work is full of inanimate, intimate, domestic objects: teapots, chairs, scissors, pegs, hair brushes – even mobile phones. Most strikingly it is chairs that appear over and over again. In earlier works, they were the subject of still lives. In this exhibition the chairs finally emerge – Zelig like – from Hattam's paintings to stand, solid, amongst us. Her chair sculptures are made from chairs that have been distressed by weather and use. As with the books, they have been dissembled. When a chair is performing its function as a chair it takes up a reasonable amount of space. When collapsed it is tiny. Most of these box-like sculptures need two or three chairs compressed into them to make an impact. The slats of wood that were once chair legs, the edge of a seat, or a strut at its back, become reduced to a series of strong lines – lines which echo the book spines and tree trunks throughout Hattam's earlier paintings.

The chairs used for these sculptures were bought in 1986. At first they were kitchen chairs but over the years they moved out into the garden and into Hattam's work space. Hattam's family chose the colours and painted them in whites, blues, pinks, yellows and oranges: colours that are similar to the ones we see in her art. Hattam has, with the help of carpenter Brian Scales, cut the chairs up, and packed the pieces together. She has compressed them into a kind of black hole, one which contains the stuff of childhood memories and holidays, family discussions: traces of skin against wood.

These sculptures reflect Hattam's interest in minimalism, an interest that increased during a recent trip to New York where she saw both the work of John Chamberlain and Donald Judd at the Dia: Beacon. But the latter's work is notable for its smooth, chrome lines. It gestures towards a technological age. Hattam, in contrast, cultivates a rough hewn feeling. These chairs don't reference the future, but the past. They speak, perhaps, of the solidity, of the messiness, of family life. Such lives would be impossible to contain in a sleeker form.



In contrast to these minimalist sculptures are some more recent paintings, paintings which use more realistic, natural images. The flat, iconographic Penguin of the book spines morphs first into the ornamental birds on Chinese vases, then into 'real' birds, perched up in the trees in some of the recent works on paper. In Hattam's Beijing Vase series vases sit on tables, as many of Hattam's objects do, but there is an expansive spread to these tables, a broadness in their angling. After a series of work using strong horizontal and vertical lines – tree trunks and book spines, books piled upon sturdy-legged tables – horizons open out. A strong sense of perspective is central to these works' composition. There is still the discipline imposed by the grid of book pages which underlie the images, but the colours – creams, whites, blues, charcoal – contribute to their expansiveness. There is a sense of sky in this series.

One of the Beijing Vase series lives on my living room wall. Alongside three vases sit a pair of scissors, a mobile phone and a brush. Every time I look at it it suggests different things to me: home, distance, Asia, unanswered calls, bonds which needs to be cut. The birds look at me with their steady, beady eyes but, unlike the penguins, these birds are not flattened, graphic images: there is the suggestion of flight. In two or three works suburban 'real' birds sit alongside the familiar objects Hattam favors. But these works are the exception rather than the rule in this exhibition, an exhibition that is titled *Innocent Works* because Hattam is experimenting with new forms and ideas.

When Hattam began working on the exhibition she was determined to experiment and be open to where the works might take her rather than imposing a destination upon them. Where they take her, it seems to me, is, as with the chair sculptures, towards a more minimal approach and *Innocent Works* includes a series of abstract paintings in which coloured polka dots overlay text, or in which the text emerges from the coloured backgrounds in diamonds and other geometric forms. These striking works are, from a distance, intensely dramatic. The contradiction is that if you stand close to them you can read the text of the book pages with greater clarity than you can in other, less abstracted, works. There are more literal – and literary – meanings to be found. In 'The Definition of Love', for example we have Andrew

Marvel exhorting, 'Had we but word enough, and time/ This coyness, lady, were no crime.' There is 'The Unfortunate Lover' and 'Young Love'. Looking at 'Freud and the Post Freudians' we can improve our theory.

Is the repeated referencing of Freud in Hattam's work a slip? Her earlier works seem to insist that everything has meaning, no matter how much an object might resist signification. Her painted chairs look like chairs, but they are also, as the sculptures tell us, the distillation of a family's life. Then she evokes Freud who tells us that family life, and relationships between parents and children, are never straightforward. Innocence does not exist. A chair, as no doubt Freud would agree, is never just a chair.

On many of Hattam's tables there lies a hair brush. Do brushes suggest to Hattam – as they do to me – a childhood scene in which a mother brushes her young daughter's hair? A scene in which a mother tells her daughter that if she wants her hair to be beautiful she must pull the brush through her hair one hundred times? That she must repeat this process every day? Repetition is both a comfort and a curse. It speaks of a desire for beauty, but also a desire for connection. In Hattam's work this is the connection between generations. It is also the connection between our instinct towards pleasure and our – sometimes opposing – intellectual drive to draw meaning from the most ordinary of things. While Hattam's individual works have a calming influence, put together her work is interrogative. Books do not simply mean what their words suggest they might or what their authors hope they do. Inanimate objects become animate. Hattam uses repetition to consider an object from every angle and give it the opportunity to speak to us. Her use of repetition is insistent. An attempt at revelation.

But her later works take us beyond this. To a less insistent place, a place of greater spaciousness. She uses thinner paint, fewer objects, and there are less book pages. Words fall away. Consequently the pages of type that are included in the latest works on paper resonate with greater intensity: 'Her life was so sad that it was almost too beautiful to be true.' Hattam is, in *Innocent Works*, trying to empty her work of meaning. At the same time she is giving us the space to find our own.