

JOHN NIXON and BARRY BARKER in conversation

Saturday 17 February 2018, 4pm | Laure Genillard Gallery



LAURE GENILLARD introduces the speakers:

Good afternoon everyone and thank you very much for coming today. May I introduce you to the artist, John Nixon, who came all the way from Melbourne, Australia to do this exhibition with us. The gallery has worked with John several times over the years and has great respect for many reasons. Not only his concerns around colour (post Malevich era of monochromes) but also his ability to juggle colour combinations in every way, starting with the objects on the painting, or the painting colour itself and its relationship to the colours on the walls.

This exhibition celebrates colour, and so is particularly enjoyable in this bleak snowy winter month. John offers a mixture of pre-planned thinking which gets fine-tuned once he arrives. It is delivered with great flexibility and upmost simplicity. What is so enticing is that nothing is pre-determined. The artist delivers his system of colours under his arms, so-to-speak. He brings a suitcase with various elements; bits of coloured wooden strips, a piece of a discarded chair leg, creating variances between components. When he arrived in London John asked us to take him around various flea markets; he found nothing relevant in the end but it did not matter to him.

The exhibition was installed and ready to go way ahead of time; and so John had time to catch the last day of his show in Paris travelling by Eurostar, go to the Opera and travel back to London, explore the London Museums, second-hand book shops and many gallery shows, stopping off at his favourite kebab shop along the way. Thank you John for your methods and your great energy.

May we also introduce you here to Barry Barker, a curator and writer who has had a very interesting trajectory. From being director of the ICA in the 70's, when he was in his late twenties, to director of the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton and later, director of the Lisson Gallery.

One of the reasons Barry is here today is because John remembered him fondly for giving him his first solo exhibition in Europe in 1978 at his then gallery located near the British Museum just around the corner from where we now are.

Barry Barker: There's a quote which you made in 1993 which I'm going to bring up to you again. You were quoted as saying *to be an artist means to question the nature of art*. Now can you elucidate more on that and what it means to you?

John Nixon: I think being an artist is a pursuit of a kind of intellectual question around the nature of what art is, what art has been and so forth rather than accepting that art is the painting and drawing of figurative subjects. So when you see that art is a questioning discipline, let's say in this instance specifically painting, there are modes of practice

and structure that you can utilise for abstract means. The formal qualities of my work have always been strong; I have always been very interested in the relationship between colour and form, in addition to the fact that the paint surface is flat. With these particular paintings, or constructed paintings, it's just a method to make the paintings with collaged elements rather than having to paint them on. This is basically the same thing because it's a bit easier therefore it's a bit easier to push things around to the position you want and glue them on. So the work becomes about the process of making; it's not drawn up first and then realised from the drawing but is rather done around an idea. There isn't any kind of pre-sketch, it's made in the actual moment. That being said it's not random as I know in each group of works what it is I'm going to be working with and I'm concurrently working on many different kind of works at the same time.

BB: I think one of the clues about how you've described this is that in a way you are more interested in matter rather than illusion or narrative. So basically it's matter, and as you go on, it's matter in relation to other matter. I think that can be a kind of way in to (the work).

JN: It is kind of a way in because I don't do traditional oil painting. I like the different material quality of painting on canvas, hessian, timber or plywood. I like the mixture and I look to change the mixture all the time. It becomes a dialogue between the surface of the painting and objects or the surface of the painting and the circle, or the colour of the timber and the colour of the paint. These kinds of things are what appeal to me.

BB: Do you see yourself as coming from a constructivist point of view or from the principles of constructionism or is that too specific?

JN: No, that's quite fine. Initially when I started my first works at art school, which were called block paintings they were principally formed on my understanding of minimalism and my current economic means and desire to work within a minimalist structure. I might have been eighteen at the time and had seen a big exhibition of American painting including Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt in Melbourne. I had nowhere to make such big paintings or no need to at the art school. So, as a result I made very small paintings. I made paintings which were three and a half inches square because you could cut this from one foot of timber and the piece of canvas was eight inches square. All my materials came from off cuts from the other students. Then these paintings were painted with enamel paint which I still work with today. I've always only really used enamel paint from the hardware shop, not from the art shop. So, for most of life I haven't bought paint from the art shop.

BB: So this is a clue isn't it? Your materials, if you like, are coming from the real world, not the art shop.

JN: This kind of minimalism is where I start. This was a notion of minimal art wherein these small block paintings, on which only the surface was painted, not the sides, were then put up with one on each wall. Therefore I could create a kind of largeness with actually quite a small painting as an exhibition. In reading about minimalism, the artists who were writing about minimalism like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, were all referencing Russian constructivism. So it was through the footnotes of these essays in Art Forum magazine in the late sixties, I then personally discovered not through my art history teacher at University, this notion of the Russian avant-garde and that form of Constructivism. Not only Malevich but all of those Russian avant-garde artists interested me and that's something which then stayed with me. Firstly, the material basis of their work and the fact that they were poor and made things with simple, found materials. Secondly, that the scale was always something you could carry under your arm and thus, that sort of lexicon stayed with me.

BB: And so therefore you were gleaning something from other artists rather than teachers or art historians. You sometimes reference Arte Povera, is that correct?

JN: Certainly. See I think that something like Russian Constructivism is one of the first Arte Povera movements. They didn't have any money and would just find objects or would paint on cardboard. In many instances there is very little paint on the surface of the painting because you had to get as much out of each tube as was possible. So it becomes a different kind of economy. Arte Povera used a lot more natural materials but it also had a strong material base and used a dialectic between one material base and another.

BB: There's a lot of thought that Arte Povera was a reaction to sculpture but I think that it was more of a reaction to the painting that went before, rather than sculpture. I don't know how you feel about that?

JN: Well it was probably a bit of both because I think that they just wanted to work with real materials in real space and by definition it was spread out on the floor which provided a relationship to sculpture. One interesting artist of the Arte Povera movement was Giorgio Griffa as he stuck with painting and used to paint on fabrics such as linen. When the painting was done it would be folded up and put away so there were no stretchers used. He used very little paint, a very free organic approach to painting which he's been able to maintain throughout his career from his early works in the late 1960s to recent works. So, in that way Arte Povera wasn't just a sculptural enterprise. What interested me was this sort of truth to materials. One of my sculpture lecturers in art school was very strong on a truth to the material, and it was from him that I learnt this methodology. He would say to me, "John if you want to make a box sculpture, you could cast it in bronze, you could make it with welded steel, or you could make it with Masonite and

paint it black, its still the same". So that was the method; not the most expensive, not the second most expensive, but the third one was the way to go.

BB: So tell me about ready-mades or your interest in ready-made things. Because looking at this exhibition there are three categories of objects. Some are more directly ready-made like the T-square. I think you described them as like a family of work, that they may talk to each other and so on. But can you give some idea about the routes of this ready-made material, these ready-made objects?

JN: I think the two most important critical avenues within twentieth century art were the two artists (who) you can say represent this, Malevich and Duchamp. You have the reduced painting, and you have the use of the ready-made. In the case of Duchamp, being French and given the time that he made these works, the articles are rather exotic. They come from a world of searching to find an exotericism, or a surrealism. But the idea of the ready-made for me was that it just becomes the canvas and the paint or the timber and the paint. The ready-made items are there within the real world. The use of the tools firstly comes from the studio or that you have these tools in the studio. They are things that come from my daily life. They are practical, they have usually some form of geometry as well; so this is why I select them.

BB: I find it fascinating that the three aspects of these objects, could in somebody else's hands, like the T square, be a vehicle for a function within drawing but you avoid that? It seems to me you avoid that because, as you say, they are found objects within the studio. That (they are) part of the process, if you want (of the) making. Rather there's something coming out, its not alien to your practice.

JN: The things themselves are usually of a domestic scale and the same goes for the pieces of timber. All the things have a kind of back-story; this white piece of wood, is actually the leg of a piece of kitchen chair that I found in a Berlin street. I've cut it on this angle; I've tidied it up a bit for my own purposes. It was just broken off. Things like this are collected from wherever I might be simply because I'm walking down that particular street, if I'd walked down a different street I wouldn't have found it. My work is based primarily in a visual understanding of the world; I'm always looking, and what I'm looking at is then informing my work.

BB: Does it mean that all the elements you use in your paintings have a kind of equal status? There's not a hierarchy, or is there?

JN: No, I have my repertoire of colours and I have shapes, like circles, squares, rectangles, lines, triangles. And then I find things within that range; it's limited in some ways but it is expansive in others.

BB: You are one of those rare artists that move into another gear in the sense that you curate your own work; such as the colours on the wall and the logic behind that. So it's like a (whole) in that you don't know where it begins and where it ends. And that's really why I call it 'an exhibition' and one which you curated of your own work, as some artists do.

JN: If we just go back for a moment to this idea of the text from Art Forum that I would read by the artists, I also found this very interesting that the artists took responsibility for the writing. So it wasn't that the art critic or the art historian wrote it. This is the moment we learn, at eighteen, that this is also the responsibly of the artist to say what the work is about, and so I was learning from them in two forms; what they wrote and what they did.

Then also I think, the first responsibility is to make the individual work of art; you have to make the good work of art, the single object. Then the work of art should be exhibited, so that's another form of responsibility. You then have to take the responsibility of how do you do that in the space that you're given - if it is a big space, if it is a small space, how many shall you show? All these questions have to be answered by you. More recently I have been working with colouring the walls in the same colours I use in the paintings. I principally use the three primary and the three secondary colours. In other instances, I have used three more colours; black, white and silver. So I have a repertoire of primarily nine colours. For a recent exhibition I had a survey of five years work in which there were seventy-five paintings, hung in two lines. So in this particular instance, for Castlemaine Art Museum in regional Victoria, I wanted to have black and white walls. As you walked into the space you saw two white walls but when you turned around the other two walls were painted black. A white painting on a white wall is very different from a white painting on a black wall; this sort of dialogue is something which interests me. I then decided to work with the colours in the paintings and to find a colour in wall paint, which is nearly the same as the colour in enamel paint. The first example of this was to use nine colours in three rooms in an exhibition in Auckland, New Zealand.

When it was time to do this exhibition in London and knowing that the gallery has two floors, I wanted to principally have the same kind of exhibition on both floors. I wanted to divide the space. In terms of our discussion here, if we start with the downstairs floor first, the colours are arranged in a spectrum. So downstairs we start with; yellow wall, then orange wall, red wall, green wall, blue wall and purple wall. For the upstairs room I wanted to have a very different dynamic. I wanted to cross the room all the time with the colour dynamic. So I put them in both a complementary but equally random mode. So, it was the same colours but when you started to look you could see

that something else was going on on both floors. And then the same logic was applied to the three groups of paintings; there's the small group of paintings on canvas with the coloured corners, which I brought with me, then there are the group of paintings which are on the plywood, where they have a coloured circle and another piece of wood of some colour. Then there's the third group, the chipboard paintings, with an accumulation or a conglomeration of a number of parts.

From Australia, I brought various wooden components with me and didn't know exactly what the outcome for these would be. The methods of construction in each body of work is different and the means to which I organise their production differs too. I then had these black and white paintings; the one down stairs with the two cones, which are from tapestry wool, the black and white one with the plate, and I had this black and white video which I brought with me, thinking I might show it in the video room. I then saw them all as being relatable, each one is similar but in its own right, different. And so the three black and white ones also become a group, but a much broader group, in that one is a painting with the two corners, one is a painting with only one object, and the other one is the video. So one relates to the circles, the other relates to (the second group) and the video relates to the ones with the accumulation (of objects). With the video it is like a painting come alive, the elements are starting to dance around within the black surface. So, all of this is something which is not preordained and comes with me, it comes as a conclusion to my work here; I know what I'm doing but the actual 'set list' is made up on the day.

BB: I think it's very interesting what you say about curating because I think some of it gets forgotten. When I was curating I was always very conscious of the installation, especially in a mixed show, whereby you took the spectator in but you also had to then walk them out again. It is a whole different thing, its two sides of a coin, going in and coming out. And just moving on from that John, how do you see the spectator, because the other day I was here and you were instructing the photographer about what you wanted from the photography and you were very precise. I found that fascinating, and it then came to me, how do you *like* to see the spectator? Is there an optimum distance from the work or is it not rigid?

JN: Well, you know we make art in one way for ourselves but we also make art for the friends of our art. And this kind of art isn't for everybody but for the people that like or love it.

I think it is also true in the nature of exhibition making, as for example in the making of an LP record, or a film, or a theatre production; you have to have a good start and you have to have a good finish. It's part of your responsibility to the public. And it's a good start; if you can excite someone straight off.

BB: Well this is what I think is the nature of (the work) because your work always responds to the environment it's in. But what's interesting is you take that very much into consideration but you also deconstruct it or you fluctuate it by the use of the colours in the room; you de-unify it somehow. And it comes together in a different kind of way, as a space.

JN: Yes, you also see the same colours downstairs and you start to relate them through the building – the red ones there, the red ones here, that's yellow, that's yellow – so there's all these other kind of spatial dynamics that are brought to bear on the experience of the exhibition. Where the paintings for example are relatively simple and reduced, the whole is complex like it is in an orchestra.

BB: John, you've mentioned it a couple of times and its something I didn't know about you, that you're equally a musician as well as an artist, and there's this equal interest in (both). So is there any overlap that you see in a way or not? I'm not saying you should do an exhibition of music; something that's never been tackled successfully which is quite interesting.

JN: I am also interested in music and its also part of my professional life as an artist, but its like 'art music'. I'm working within this combination of art, art music and photography. I also work with drawings and collages. In each of these things I find a discipline around the specifics of what it is that I do. And because I'm doing all of them, it's my eye and my sensibility which permeates these things; so in that sense they're all like representations of my work, but in different forms.

BB: Do you think colour has a different meaning or association to things in Australia as to what it does in England? Just in consideration to that idea of light.

JN: Well it's very useful to have an exhibition like this in England because its so cold and grey. But in that sense I don't really think there's any difference. I work in a way with an understanding and a knowledge and a kind of correlation with European art. My influence is not Australia or Australian art it's the history of European art and American art of the twentieth century. Often people will say that the sunlight is different in Australia, and in my experience it's usually said by an artist who's not from Australia. Whereas for most Australians, it's the light we know. But ultimately, I love nothing more than a sunny day. I'm a happy person so I'll wake up and say 'oh the suns out!'. Nothing better than colour and form.