



FRANZ EHMANN
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By Kylie Spear

As I walked into Franz Ehmann's studio, I instantly noticed a faint aroma of honey. His suburban Brisbane studio is neat and ordered. His works are displayed in close proximity to personal, domestic items, framed within a backdrop of still-wet washing, and a carefully manicured garden.

These sweet amber objects, I discovered, were comprised of carefully arranged piles of beeswax bricks. These bricks, each exactly 1 kg in weight and with identical dimensions have been installed in stacks echoing minimal sculpture of the 1960's or modernist housing towers. Yet, each discrete object comprised its own unique hue and textural quality, despite their precise production.

Natural materials such as beeswax, eggs and milk are recurring motifs in the artists work, and not only fill his exhibition spaces with sweet aromas, but point to ideas of life cycles and purity. His past experiences as a chef may have informed the selection of such materials where, essentially, raw food matter is converted into sustenance for the body and, furthermore, life. Such unadulterated materials can only be acquired from live animals, and while humans are able to reproduce them synthetically, such copies lack the allegorical integrity present in the original material. These symbolic secretions both perish and preserve in different circumstances, and philosophically support the rich dialogue that underpins his practice^[1].

Alongside the honey-bricks were lines of small red, blue, yellow and black buildings. Resembling small Monopoly houses these miniature homes were constructed of pigment and beeswax; this latter material the original home for a mass of bees from which they were made to evacuate^[2]. In another corner of the studio were two slightly larger houses, made in the same way except for the addition of black, scrawled text,

i dig for territory long lost finding my own footprint, i dig beneath boundaries, i dig beneath frontiers, i dig beneath every nation, i dig connections to each other, i dig for a buried flag, for propaganda, for polemics, for rhetoric, all i'm digging for is failure . . .

Hand-written text features heavily in Franz's work. Often scribed in ink directly onto objects or pieces of Belgian linen, his handwriting reveals emotions and desires present within his larger practice. His chosen words are often phrased in appealing, fragmented, stream-of-thought entries;

"Is anyone listening? . . . So, I've had this really great idea you have to hear this. . . I can't do this. . . I hope you can help. . . I usually. . . Yes! Good Outcome. . . and . . .no . . .oh . . ."

The nature of the handwriting itself heightens the emotive qualities of the work; a little crooked and crowded in places, uneven text size, perhaps the odd spelling or grammatical error here and there. These nuances convey a sense of intimacy, longing and urgency. This is seen most clearly in his ongoing work *Wishlist* (2006 onwards),



quite literally an extensive list of private thoughts and desires made public when transcribed onto canvas. It is relatable in its transparency and vulnerability; recognisable as externalised wishful thinking.

Franz incorporates found materials into his works such as blackboards, shirts and newspaper. These materials bring their own histories to his practice; stories about world events, glimpses into an individual's personality, a blank surface to inscribe. His neatly folded business shirts become entombed in pigments and wax. Stiffened and brittle, these objects act as effigies of the bodies, the hard-working 'providers', they once clothed. Constructed from masses of discarded newspaper, his artwork *BLOWN* (2014) drapes laconically from the ceiling. Each newspaper sheet has been delicately cut to resemble the numeral 'zero'. Suspended en masse, these shapes fall loosely over one another, concealing and voiding each other's individual form and meaning.

As I continued to explore Franz's studio, I noticed a strong sense of repetition and order that structured the creation of his works. These guiding rules, such as the repeated use of certain numbers and weights - 14 (as in the Christian story of the 14 stations of the cross); 0 (the continued use of the numeral that signifies nothing); 1 kg (the unit weight of the beeswax bricks) - as well as the ongoing use of loaded natural materials, handwritten text, lines and ordered piles of objects. All these imposed systems and motifs point to their own complexity. Franz has revealed that his works are political, but not - religious, without doctrine. They are propositions without agenda^[3].

Perhaps these ambivalent qualities can be partially attributed to Franz's childhood in Europe. During my studio visit Franz revealed to me that he grew up in the state of Vorarlberg, a region in Western Austria. This region lies close to the borders of Germany, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, and its residents speak a dialect that most other Austrians do not understand. After the terror of WWII, and the subsequent instability it inflicted within Austria, politicians grappled to restore order. The state of Vorarlberg was deemed 'übrig', or superfluous, and its borders were contested. There were "14 point plans" (that number again) and other regulations put forward to attempt a sense of structure^[4]. Such measures echo Franz's working methodology, where rules and systems imposed by the artist, instead of guiding the viewer to a narrow or resolute reading of an object, paradoxically result in a series of open-ended questions. These methods simultaneously examine institutional mystification of art objects, and their significance in the face of historical, social and political issues^[5].

Franz's works are both structured and amorphous, specific and enigmatic, rigid and poetic. They are concerned with revealing the illusionary nature of power, and the Western art's need to mystify objects beyond their own capacity to communicate. They avoid institutional systems of meaning creation only to the degree that these curatorial tactics can still be critiqued.

The beauty of Franz's work lies in their ambiguous simplicity, and ability to convey small yet universal truths^[6]. There is a desire for purity, as reflected in his choice of somatic materials and working methods. There is a longing to make sense of shared surroundings, seen through layers of rules and systems that mirror the complexity of outside life. Like the artist's home studio, which blended evidence of his personal life and habits with his creative work, his is a practice that is equally concerned with critiquing our world, while being located firmly within it.



- [1] Holubizky, I 2000. Encounters with a realistic existentialism in 'Open panorama', IMA, Brisbane.
[2] Grayson, R 2000. Almost there, Artspace, Sydney.
[3] Ehmann, F 2014. Pers. comm.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Holubizky, I 2000. Encounters with a realistic existentialism in 'Open panorama', IMA, Brisbane.
[6] Colless, E 2005. Franz Ehmann: the end in 'Speaking the world into existence', IMA, Brisbane.

IMAGES

Cover | *Yield*, 2014, 40 x 30 x 32 cm, Shirt pigment beeswax on Beeswax blocks
Inside Left | *Black House 2* and *Black House 3*, 2005, 14.5 x 28.5 x 28 cm, pigment, beeswax, cardboard and varnish
Inside Right | *Mulberry Leaf 1*, 13.5 x 8.5, Mulberry Leaf, Beeswax and Black Pigment
Back Cover | *Blown Head Line*, 2014, 29 x 42 cm, photograph mounted on aluminium, edition of 5

Exhibition Dates September 11 - 27, 2014

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Opening Hours

During Exhibition periods:
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Saturday: 12pm - 4pm

