KINGS

ANNABEL BROWN

and I ask myself, is that all there is?

EMERGING
WRITERS PROGRAM

Artist Run

Established in 2003, KINGS Artist-Run provides a location for contemporary art practice, supporting distinctive experimental projects by artists at all stages of their careers.

Open 12–5pm Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday

69 Capel Street,
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KINGS Artist Run acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we operate. We offer our respect to Elders both past and present and extend this offer to all First Nations people.

When I first met with Aaron Ashwood over the Easter break to view and discuss the work that makes up *dressy casual*, I was reminded of Susan Sontag's question of the photographic snapshot, "what could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself, and with a minimum of effort?"[1] In unceremonious fashion, Ashwood assembles objects and materials so visually negligible that the encounter initially registers less as a completed artwork and more like installation leftovers or the common muck of an artist's studio. Mute and motionless, the unassuming, salvaged materials, some which have been recycled from past installations, appear with little to no alteration. Even the surreal charge of a styrofoam mannequin head bearing Ashwood's shaved, curly black locks wanes into the banal messiness of the scene.

It is the perceived absence of any explicit artistic gesture where things begin to feel off, even wrong perhaps. As I look at the miscellaneous deposit of stuff, jumbled and scattered on the gallery floor, the work appears devoid of any kind of formal flourish or affective expression. It is not for lack of trying, as Ashwood told me that he'd long-tested the configuration of these objects. To deny my low-grade neuroses around Ashwood's work and this sometimes difficult-to-reconcile mode of art making, felt like a door slamming. To quote Sontag again, "real art has the capacity to make us nervous"[2], and yes, my reaction to Ashwood's work made me a little nervous. Is this something left behind? Is this art? These questions are not rhetorical but bona fide. Ashwood's work materialises so strikingly marred, no fancy suturing or high-production gloss, but a tableau of slowly accumulated stains, errant scratches, cut and torn surfaces.

Funnily enough, it was a memeified twitter thread with text pasted over, 'beauty in the mundane save me', by a user with a low-res profile picture of Yoshi that shifted something. It reeled me back from digging too far into my reaction, not dismissive but somewhat suspicious. Instead, I found myself wanting to look further, self-questioning and searching for a way to think through this unusual attention applied to the debris of capitalism.

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[1] Susan Sontag, "Melancholy Objects," in *On Photography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977; Penguin Books, 2008), 52.
[2] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 5.

Here, Ashwood refuses to ennoble waste, refraining from any recognisable attempt to reconfigure the objects into something new or unforeseen – or even to become anything at all. In other words, there is no resurrection of the mundane – no space of potentiality through which these objects might be lifted or transfigured from their modest, thing-like status into materialisations of hypothetical possibility or renewed aesthetic value. Ashwood is entirely committed to the object's literalness, which collides with my inclination to ascribe symbolism and meaning to the objects. Resisting a congealing of objects into image, I realise there is no other function - no sense that these extant objects might serve as portals to elsewhere; they are what they are. Ashwood's work confronts us, both figuratively and literally, with precisely what we had hoped to discard and forget.

The difficulty is to have the found object without the weight of its art history. However hackneyed, and so fused into memory of the historical avant-garde, a connection can be drawn from Ashwood's practice to the legacies of the readymade. In 1917, Duchamp with his urinal-cum-readymade, *Fountain* (1917), prodded at the museum establishment's aesthetic judgement. By submitting an industrially mass-produced object, Duchamp's ragebait suggested that with institutional framing, anything could assume artistic status. In the tune of this Duchampian gesture, the broken headphones and scuffed milk crate, among the debris of Ashwood's arrangement, could accrue the same aura as a Bernini or Botticelli.

Duchamp's gesture, however, marked for many an anti-elitist rupture, staging an assault on an establishment anxious about the collapse of art's aura – its claim to stand apart from, and above, other ordinary objects in the circulation of labour and production. The accumulated wear and debris of Ashwood's installation feels far from calibrated to provoke; rather markedly subdued, even antiheroic. In its unassuming presence, there is an immense churning silence. All that used up stuff from a day's work amounting to nothing. Ashwood's work leaves me with a sense of quiet abandon, an emptiness. That is the reality of the real-world thing, it isn't trying to mean more than what it is.

During my conversation with Aaron, he alludes to a reluctance to include any of his more resolved paintings in the exhibition. There are glimpses of painting, only visible if I squat and peer through the triangulated canvases leaning against each other. They're unwilling and hiding in plain sight. The green paint strokes appear decidedly scrappy. Knowing that Ashwood works as a casual gallery painter, these

uneven, half-hearted strokes read less as painterly gestures than as provisional marks, akin to the quick test patches brushed onto a wall before committing. These are not gestures that fail to adhere to the logic of painting or art; rather, they hesitate and withdraw from the expectation to complete, as if coming to a half halt. They remain potentially unfinished, stuck in the exhaustion – or perhaps inability – to adjust, as though having lost, or having never possessed, the capacity to enchant us or resolve into a final form.

Looking again at Ashwood's material choices I see a used tub of white ceiling paint, window shade blind components, a pair of shoe soles and the torn leather back of the chair, within the assortment of debris. My mind circles back to Douglas Huebler's oft-quoted pronouncement that "the world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add anymore"[3]. Ashwood's work - which resolutely re-presents everyday objects and industrial materials stripped of their functionality and removed from circulation - seems to stage a kind of resistance, a cessation of production. But this operates less as critique than as a deflection of the demand that these objects should be made to stand for anything at all.

I give up the search for what might be special here, pulling myself back from the impulse to treat these objects as charged symbols or to place them in the service of allegorical readings. What Ashwood's work instead proposes is a different mode of engagement: one not oriented toward reflection or revelation, nor toward meaning behind or beyond the material surface. What the work leaves me with is a general sense of disengagement, where what has been expelled from its former function is neither redeemed nor recovered, but remains too exhausted, too withdrawn from the imperative to produce meaning. In this sense, the work produces a kind of void – it is as if Ashwood renders absence as material, a space in which the representational or communicative function of art falters, or perhaps never cohered at all.

[3] Seth Siegelaub, *January 5-31, 1969*.(New York, 1969).

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