

STATION

Nadine Christensen

21 June — 12 July 2014

A crashing cymbal announces your presence. It's a real clanger, this makeshift drum and pulley trip-hazard, roped through the gallery rafters and shattering the deferential white cube quiet whenever anyone places their weight on the pedal underfoot. Dormant on the floor, the cymbal lifts and drops from a bulky rope with the loose tension of a bungee cord. It's an uncommon arrangement of things.

Nadine Christensen's recent paintings are full of uncommon arrangements, precarious pile-ups that could just as easily indicate a game as a hazard. And while they're void of figures, there sure are signs of people, each painting containing a clash of nature and the built environment. In one work we see this collision epitomized by the bird hide that winds labyrinthine upon a scale-less landscape. With open walls and small slotted windows, the lean-to construction has no clear inside or outside, no exit point visible within the composition. It could be claustrophobic were it not so open, this attempt at containment within expansive space.

Christensen has long treated interior and exterior space as unbound, her paintings often containing buildings partially cut open to the sky or landscapes edged by the hint of a frame, prop or shadow. Windows and doors create transitional spaces in some earlier works, while mirrors or paintings-within-paintings allow for the jump cuts between interior and exterior picture planes in others. There's a surreal quality to this experience of space, but, like a film set or video game environment, in Christensen's compositions the unreal is built of elements that are rendered entirely believable.

While in some paintings vast space is unanchored, in others, the landscape spirals in on itself. The contradictory compositional decisions can be equally dis-locating. Against a mauve backdrop, segments of patterned cladding telescope around the picture board. The unfurling structure mimics a crane but the surface texture is achieved with a sponge as in a do-it-yourself decorative flourish. A black and white zigzag design punctuates another circular composition – where repeated table silhouettes jut against wood grain huts, all surrounded by dense green bush that disallows any ground or horizon. In both these works there is no sure way up, no way out.

The layering of multiple spatial zones disorients and divides our attention. Christensen either lets things float, or pulls them forward or back by detailing surfaces or inserting framing cutout shapes as if making a collage. Toying with the logic of perspective in this way compounds the collision of spaces, casting background and close-up as irrelevant schematics. Instead, we take in the total image with a split-screen attention span, accepting the internal logic of disjointed elements sharing the board.

A combination of applications – rubbing, dripping, sponge and scratching – further layer and differentiate sections of the paintings. These treatments and Christensen's range of painterly styles, from flat blocks of colour to intense detail, are all applied in varying speeds and reflect different tempos. Her hills and dirt piles have the look of a de-peopled Giotto landscape – the painter who first respected the flatness of the walls his frescos covered – while her treatment of the bird hide construction starts out as a sketchy outline in the foreground, worked up to convincing detail in the distance. In effect Christensen is generating not only multiple spatial planes, but also what critic David Joselit might describe as multiple time zones within the images.

In Joselit's analysis, paintings containing divergent time zones in this way may reflect the contemporary 'experience of simultaneous capture within multiple electronic and mechanical devices', the internal splitting enabled by technologies that allow our eyes to occupy different temporalities from our feet or hands.⁽¹⁾ This resonates for Christensen, an artist whose works have been saturated with electronic light, who has taken mobile phones and digital cameras as

subject matter in previous bodies of work, plug boards and extension cords winding their way into many of her past paintings.

While no longer so focused on personal objects, such everyday items – mementos of our lives and the things around us – are still present in Christensen's current paintings. The rubbings pressed upon the painting surfaces (and collected in an artist's book) are impressions of wooden floors, brick walls, kitchen tupperware and hairclips. Turned furniture legs reappear from earlier paintings. Newspapers, a once relentless symbol of daily life and times now potentially headed to obsolescence, blow in the wind like streamers on a string.

As a motif, the bird hide is a continuation from an earlier series of works inspired by the remnant structures and markers of habitation left outdoors by unseen figures such as bird watchers, survivalists and the like – those trying to commune with nature. Now, more urban and industrial elements have also come into play with high fences, steel chain and besser blocks cutting a colder edge through Christensen's landscapes.

A scene of abandoned architecture is the setting for two works that comprise the only interior paintings in the exhibition. Yet through cracks, cutout space and a dilapidated roof, the sky is everywhere. A bamboo tripod is silhouetted in the foreground of one – its shadow more solid than its flimsy reality. In this image the layers of pictorial space, registering in different spatial and temporal zones, disrupt an otherwise clear sense of depth as walls are reduced to colourfields and a cutout portion of sky floats to one side as if Magritte has been here. In the crumbling zone of these two paintings we seem to be squatting in a stasis between construction and demolition. The building is a ruin, a ghost; the stack of building blocks woefully inadequate.

**

Sometime soon after moving to Melbourne in 2005 I must have picked up an exhibition poster from Uplands Gallery for *Fine and mild* by Nadine Christensen. The image was a domestic painting of a lounge room – gas heater, crochet blanket left in a heap on the floor, the weather showing on the TV on a secondhand table, loose cables, fake flokati rug. The interior design aesthetic was welcomingly familiar to me, somehow conjuring a non-specific kind of homesickness and comforting at the same time. I blu-tacked the A4 poster on my bedroom wall in my flat and left it there for years.

Across the street now is a recently bulldozed site half-a-block long and wide, about to transform into a multi-level apartment building but at the moment occupied only by mounds of dirt. To one side of the site a dark and dwarfed cottage is wedged against hastily constructed and cramped two-story townhouses. On the other side of the building site a couple are ramping up their ambitious and painstaking renovation and extension of a single-fronted villa. Next to them, is a large but forlorn weatherboard house, painted pale green halfway through last century, its curtains always closed and its concrete garden enhanced by a little concrete statue koala at the door.

You might say it's an unusual arrangement of things. The demolition has revealed new sightlines to the roofs and back-ends of other buildings, the train tracks suddenly visible, gaps letting in disorientating glimpses of the next street and the sky beyond. The same familiarity found in the mix of the gleaned, the knock-off and the handmade of Christensen's mid-2000s domestic scenes, is present in elements of the expanded sites of construction and semi-industrialised zones of her current work. It's a Melbourne sprawl and an Australian experience of space that can be both vast and constricted at once.

Yet these pictorial worlds combine the familiar with the imagined and impossible. Drawing attention to different portions of the image in different ways, presence in space and time is split, dis-located. These particular scenes, structures and landscapes make sense only in the clashing composite zones of Nadine Christensen paintings.

– Rosemary Forde, 2014

(1) David Joselit, 'Time Zones', *Artforum International*, vol. 52, no. 5, January 2014, pp180-184.