GLITTER: PAT LARTER vs LOLA RYAN
CRUTHERS COLLECTION OF WOMEN’S ART
LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY
AT THE DR HAROLD SCHENBERG ART CENTRE
26 JULY - 27 SEPTEMBER 2014
Pat Larter, Bumpy Bump, 1993, acrylic, decorative mirrors and glitters on board, 183 x 123 cm, CCWA 808. © Courtesy the artist's estate.
Lola Ryan, Shellwork wall hanging, 2002, 20 x 22 cm, CCWA 716d. © Courtesy the artist’s estate
I made the decision to bring Pat Larter and Lola Ryan’s works together almost the instant I saw them. They were shown to me in order to illustrate the ‘idiosyncrasies’ of the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art, which was developed by the Cruthers family according to personal inclinations and parameters before beginning its life as a public resource at the University of Western Australia. That works considered ‘idiosyncratic’ should share such uniform formal characteristics was immediately fascinating, as was the inclination to describe their particular aesthetic in this way. The greater narratives of the works and of the artists who made them, their social histories and cultural contexts, revealed other important connections.

Patricia ‘Pat’ Larter immigrated to New South Wales from England at the age of 26 with her husband, artist Richard Larter. She had studied art herself at Toynbee Hall art college, attached to the University of London, after leaving school at age 14. Pat is the subject of countless of Richard’s celebrated paintings, and although she is still frequently described as his muse she developed and maintained a substantial practice of her own, utilizing the ephemeral forms of performance and mail art. Her work, like her appearances in Richard’s paintings, is infamously confronting, a series of punk puns on body and gender politics deliberately crafted to cause the viewer what she described as ‘mental heartburn’ executed with characteristic fearlessness and humour. She began painting shortly before her premature death in 1996, extending her figurative collages from the 1970s into large ‘super-scans’ (early digital photographic reproductions) embellished with acrylic and glitter. She also produced a series of abstractions focusing almost entirely on texture and pattern.

Lola Ryan’s objects belong to a tradition particular to the indigenous community of La Perouse in New South Wales. La Perouse was the site of one the first missions that would segregate indigenous and colonial Australia; shellwork was introduced to the women of La Perouse by missionaries in the late 1800s. It bears the aesthetic legacy of its Victorian roots in its domestic scale and popular forms – boxes, hanging ‘samplers’ and miniature shoes – although it has evolved its own distinct material vocabulary. La Perouse women would sell their objects to day-tripping beach-goers as souvenirs, alongside men’s crafts such as wood burning and carving, providing an important source of income. There is a significant history of the exhibition and trade of La Perouse shellwork objects in New South Wales, although their status as art is more recent. Lola Ryan’s works are a distinct, contemporary interpretation of the shellwork canon, featuring luridly dyed shells, bright synthetic fabrics and glitter in place of the commonly used shell grit ‘mortar’.

The different means by which Larter and Ryan have arrived at their particular practices and sensibilities makes similarities between them more striking. Formal and material connections are immediately evident. Both artists are also frequently described as operating outside of mainstream art practice, their inclusion in its discourse a gradual process of reconsideration. There are factors contributing to this delayed recognition that are specific to each artist. For example, a goal of mail and performance art – Larter’s primary medium – was to avoid the conservative monumentalizing of museums, allowing for the exploration and widespread and direct dissemination of transgressive ideas; as shellwork is a ‘post-contact’ tradition many collectors of indigenous art initially looked to what were considered to be more ‘authentic’ representations of the first Australian cultures. However, there has been – historically in the case of shellwork, and more specifically in the case of the Larters – an institutional tendency to favour the work of the men nearby.
Richard Larter’s paintings may be famously provocative, but what separates his paintings from Pat’s, and what unites Pat Larter’s works with Lola Ryan’s, is their material provocation to the hierarchies of Good Taste. Good Taste should by now be sufficiently problematized, evoking a classist and gendered reading of objects that frequently works to the detriment of the decorative, crafty, domestic and popular – i.e., to objects made by or for women. It is, after all, a long while since the Industrial Revolution made aesthetic objects available to the supposedly undiscerning masses, and also, I hope, since a more mainstream sense has developed among cultural commentators that aesthetic ideals are not as unanimous as once assumed. However, here is a practical demonstration of the hierarchies of taste in action: in 2013, Elise Blumman’s Summer Nude, a 1939 oil painting of an expressionistic, sun-drenched female figure, was hung on the foyer-facing wall of the Lady Sheila Cruthers wing of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, unavoidable to gallery visitors. It was also reproduced larger than life on banners hung on two faces of the gallery exterior. For Pat Larter’s Marty with Plant Life – a somewhat blurry, bedazzled canvas digitally printed with a nude man holding a rather un-provocative yoga pose – to hang in the same position it was recommended that we put up a new wall, in case visitors were offended.

Marty has caused consternation across Australia. When the work was included in the Adelaide Biennale of 1996 The Advertiser used it to illustrate a scathing review of the exhibition, whilst making an express point of blacking out the rude bits⁹. When the super scans were exhibited in Sydney, Sydney Morning Herald art critic John McDonald used them as a derisive point of comparison to a series of nudes by Bill Henson, describing Larter’s work as “tawdry, home made porn” displaying “an eroticism that could be bought at any newsagent”⁵. Henson’s, however, continued the various legacies of Streeton, Roberts, Titan, Tintoretto, an expression of “primal youthful sexuality finding an outlet beyond all social conventions” and an art of “concealment and suggestion” made by an artist finding that the “greatest guarantee of innocence is the aura of High Art”. Tellingly, one could “never ignore the aesthetic aspects of Henson’s work and see only the naked bodies”¹¹ – the glittery additions to the works offend so as to make them invisible. But the aesthetic of the super scans is entirely the point, and that point is that the art of ‘concealment and suggestion’ is bullshit. In a typewritten artist statement titled WOMANFESTO Larter describes her mail art and performances as “being parodies of malegiven sexual stereotypes imposed on women by the media and the male world in general”¹², concerns that she undoubtedly carried into her painted works. Her super scans are literally images of youthful sexuality finding an outlet beyond all social convention, mocking the tasteful eroticism of the nude in art whilst also celebrating the individuality of the figures pictured.

Larter’s abstract works utilize a similar strategy, an ironic yet celebratory examination of painting. The gestural machismo or cool detachment of high abstraction are pilloried with “toxic petro-chemical colours”, with impasto like icing, gift wrap patterns and hobby-craft embellishments, gendered domestic references that are “hot rather than homey... Sexy, even if cheap and cheesy, is celebrated as something real and at the same time it’s a bit of a joke, a lark”¹³. Beyond a symbolic reading of their materiality, complexities of composition and form in the abstract works support long, close looking. These works work, asking us to confront and question resistance to them.

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*Pat Larter, Marty and Plant Life, 1995, superscan, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 134 x 93 cm, CCWA 807. © Courtesy the artist’s estate*
Maria Nugent uses the first sentence of An Economy of Shells: A brief history of La Perouse Aboriginal women’s shellwork and its markets, 1880–2010 to acknowledge that the objects she is discussing are not to everyone’s taste, however their long-time status as souvenirs suggests that they must have had popular appeal. Their value is discussed as though in spite of their taste levels, although Nugent argues that the inherent ‘quirkiness’ of the works may in fact be what is driving their current institutional renaissance. The presence of Ryan’s work in many public collections, including this one, is in part due the advocacy and donations of Peter Fay, an artist, curator, collector and long time champion of ‘outsider’ art whose taste and personal, non-market-driven approach to collecting places him, as described by Art Collector Magazine, ‘ahead of the curve’. Says Fay: ‘When you close the front door, it’s yourself you’ve got to live with. Have the faith to say ‘I don’t care, but I like that’ and don’t put any monetary value on it.’ A number of Lola Ryan’s works were commissioned by Fay, who often collaborated with her on their production.

Much of the discussion of shellwork as objects of value, however, centers not on their aesthetic appeal of but on their social history and agency, focusing on the objects as a demonstration of resistance or survival, or as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge between generations. In these examinations, the word used most frequently to describe shellwork’s aesthetic - particularly Ryan’s objects, which tend towards the more flamboyant end of the spectrum - is kitsch, in part due to their association with the tourist trade and to the adoption of the Sydney Harbour Bridge as a key motif. Shellwork does bear all of the hallmarks of kitsch; as a souvenir it is laden with sentimental value, it employs gaudy and florid detailing applied as veneer, it is made, ultimately, to decorate the home. That much of the discussion of kitsch relates to the domestic and decorative should already suggest a problematic bias but the use of the term in this context, either to critique the tastes of the maker or the viewer, is further problematic in its references to imitation. Kitsch objects were traditionally a cheaper, more poorly produced pantomime of an ‘authentic’ aesthetic experience, lacking in critical distance.

Neither Larter nor Ryan’s works can be considered to be crassly imitative, although each artist makes reference to tradition. The aesthetic of Ryan’s objects, operating within a long-established and continuing system of cultural production and signification, is a deliberate, personal choice. She says: “I always add a little glitter, that’s my mark”. Larter’s use of materials can be read as parody, but her irony is impure as the genuine joy in her materials and subjects is undeniable. The work of both artists can be unpacked to describe complex systems of meaning and value, and their aesthetic ‘idiosyncrasies’ can in fact be connected to a vast legacy, although perhaps not so cleanly to Titan or Tintoretto. To me, these works are not idiosyncratic. In fact, they feel incredibly familiar; bearing in mind that I discovered the art of Mike Kelley via the music of Sonic Youth; Mambo boardshorts and Ken Done bedspreads, puff paint and glitter glue embellishments on t-shirts make me nostalgic and ultimately, happy; my highschool had to ban glittery makeup because we were applying craft glitter, made of glass, to our eyelids in search of the ultimate sparkle. Taste is mercurial, produced and altered by circumstance. It is cultural and, like objects, can be read as such. The ‘challenge’ these works present in their neon palettes, their glitter, their embrace of the decorative and of craft forces the continuing hierarchies of whatever Good Taste, and by extension, High Art, may be into the light.
2. The boundaries between Richard and Pat’s individual practices are in fact quite blurred. Pat’s early modelling for Richard’s paintings is more traditionally posed and passive, but she eventually played a more active role in directing their content. It is easy to see their individual work shares themes and motifs. Under Pat’s direction, Richard took the photographs of her that she used in her work but he also used those photographs as sources for his paintings. The pair also produced many collaborative super-8 films and prints (See Deborah Hart’s essay accompanying ‘Richard Larter: A Retrospective’ at the National Gallery of Australia: www.nga.gov.au/Exhibition/LARTER ) In ‘Pat Larter: Kitchen to Gallery’ (published in Politics and Culture, Issue 4 2005) Joanne Mendelsohn claims that as late as 2004 the National Gallery of Australia had been attributing work by Pat Larter to Richard.
4. Text from her mail art: SEX IS ATTITUDES/SEXIST ATTITUDES/SEX IS TATTY DUDES
7. Both Maria Nugent and Daphne Nash note Esme Timbery’s 2005 win of the inaugural Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Prize with a blue shellwork Habour Bridge, and curator Dijon Mundine’s commissioning of 200 pairs of shell work booties from Timbery for Ngadhu, Ngulili, Ngeaninyagu — A Personal History of Aboriginal Art in the Premier State in 2008 - a work subsequently purchased by the Museum of Contemporary Art - as notable moments in the recent reconsideration of shellwork’s artistic value. Prior to this, shellwork had been exhibited for the first time in a museum context at the Powerhouse Musuem in 1988, as part of a feature on the La Perouse Aboriginal community in a gallery called ‘Australian Communities’.
8. ibid.
9. Article fragment, author’s name removed, subheading ‘Blowies die for art,’ The Advertiser, Friday March 1st 1996 [document from the Pat Larter Archive, Art Gallery Of New South Wales Archive.]
11. ibid.
12. ibid.
14. ibid.
15. ‘Peter Fay: Playing His Own Game’, Art Collector, Issue 57, July - September 2011.
16. See Daphne Nash’s ‘From shell work to shell art: Koori women creating knowledge and value on the South Coast of NSW’, craft + design enquiry, Vol 2, 2010.
LIST OF WORKS

Pat Larter (1936 – 1996)

 Runaway blues, 1993, mixed media, glitter, hologram metallic tape & synthetic polymer paint on hardboard, 91.3 x 60.7 cm, State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Gift of Sue and Ian Bernadl, 1995

 Bumpty Bump, 1993, Acrylic, decorative mirrors and glitters on board, 183 x 123 cm, CCWA 808. © Courtesy the artist’s estate

 Rip it up, 1994, acrylic glitter and jewels on board, 91 x 105 cm, CCWA 623. © Courtesy the artist’s estate

 Marty and Plant life, 1995, superscan, acrylic and glitter on canvas, 134 x 93 cm, CCWA 807. © Courtesy the artist’s estate

Lola Ryan (1925 – 2003)

 Group Of Shellwork Objects, 2002, shells, fabric and glitter over cardboard, dimensions variable, CCWA 716. © Courtesy the artist’s estate

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Cover image: Pat Larter, Bumpty Bump (detail), 1993, acrylic, decorative mirrors and glitters on board, 183 x 123 cm, CCWA 808. © Courtesy the artist’s estate.

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