

Influences /



BY HELEN JOHNSON
02 AUG 2016

Portfolio: Helen Johnson

A cancelled seminar, a misprinted newspaper, and Invasion Day graffiti: the Australian artist shares her selection of important images



All images courtesy: the artist

Somebody's thoughtful addition of the Aboriginal flag to the facade of the State Parliament in Victoria, Australia, during the Invasion Day march on 26 January, 2016. 26 January is an annual public holiday in Australia, marking what is officially termed 'Australia Day', the anniversary of Captain James Cook's landing on the east coast of the continent in 1788. The British Crown declared Australia *Terra Nullius* ('nobody's land') and commenced processes of aggressive dispossession through massacres, the destruction of villages and various oblitative grazing practices. Wars were fought on a number of fronts, but the Australian government has never acknowledged this; a treaty has never been made. In 1938, the sesquicentenary of British colonial invasion, the Aborigines Progressive Association named 26 January a national Day of Mourning to mark 150 years of brutal treatment and theft of land. Though for many non-indigenous Australians 'Australia Day' constitutes a day of barbecues, beer and blinkered nationalism, an increasing number of people now recognize it as Invasion Day, and join marches nationwide in acknowledgement.



In April 2014, the *Australian Financial Review*, a Fairfax Media instrument, accidentally printed and distributed an early draft version of their front page, resulting in a rare moment of honesty issuing forth from the print media. The most notable headline among the placeholders was 'Arms Buildup: Buys Planes, World is Fukt'.



Croquet at Clare College, Cambridge: 'We all know the real reason for getting women here; it's to achieve a higher academic standard. They talk about improving the sex ratio and so on, but their real motive is to get better results for Clare.'

part from a lesbian – actually The competition is keenest for a place colleges – which are poor, whereas Clare masculinity characteristic of Can
at King's, despite rumours of emotional is rich, extremely yet unobtrusively rich: Within its pink

A few years ago I clipped this image from an old copy of the no longer extant *Nova* magazine, and it has been hanging around my studio ever since. I find something satisfying in the coupling of eye-rolling and lilting exasperation with the snappy calling-out of the motives underlying Clare College's decision to accept women – both attitudes to take towards the powerful and disingenuous.



When I was little my mum was all about crafts in the home – knitting, decoupage, patchwork, dried flowers. She was not so heavily engaged with art, other than a few framed prints that hung around the house, mostly Pre-Raphaelites, Vienna Secession and the Heidelberg School. Sometimes though, my mum's incidental decorative flourishes have a sort of sculptural deftness that reminds me a little of Isa Genzken, nestled in amongst the rustic cottage aesthetics.



A simultaneous enactment and negation of formalist aesthetics.



Because my grandparents lived in London and I grew up in Melbourne, I only saw them on rare occasions, and I didn't know that my grandmother, Edna Coleman, was a prolific painter from the late 1960s through to the early '80s, until after she passed away when I was in my late teens. I love that her paintings enable me to feel my way around her localities, between south-east

London where she spent her adult life, Yorkshire, where she grew up, and various other places around England. I enjoy gazing upon the details she recorded, and the compositions she enlisted in the service of capturing these details. She also recorded a rare trip to Australia in 1980, when I was a few months old. It is a painting of a playground by the beach, me in a pram, my parents and three sisters surrounding me. The setting is St. Kilda, already a bizarre nomination as it connects a desolate Scottish island and a busy bayside promenade on the south-east coast of Australia. In the background to the left is a lyrebird, which would never be seen on the coast. My grandmother must have seen it in the wet forests of the Dandenong Ranges, a couple of hours' drive to the north-east. Painting as a record of compressed experiences, reconstituted into a memory space.

HELEN JOHNSON

Helen Johnson (b.1979) is an artist who lives and works in Melbourne, Australia. She has recently been the subject of solo exhibitions at Glasgow International, as part of the director's program (2016); Sutton Gallery, Melbourne (2015); Laurel Gitlen, New York (2015); and Chateau Shatto, Los Angeles (2015). Her work has also been included in a number of group exhibitions: 'Pleasure & Reality', National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2015); 'June: a painting show', Sadie Coles HQ, London (2015); and 'Sunny and Hilly', Minerva, Sydney (2014). In 2015, her book *Painting is a Critical Form* was published by 3-ply. In 2017, Johnson will present a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London.