studio international

Published 25/03/2017 E-MAIL PRINT

# Helen Johnson: 'I wanted to resist presenting some sort of unified image of history'

The Australian artist's new exhibition at the ICA in London re-examines Britain's colonial relationship with Australia. She talks about what that means to her and how her work reflects those ideas

by ALEXANDER GLOVER

I first encountered the work of Helen Johnson (b1979, Melbourne) around this time last year at Glasgow International 2016. During a contemporary art festival dominated by installation, new media and sculpture, Johnson's paintings stood out immediately. They were hung in a row from the ceiling of Glasgow's historic Kelvin Hall, with both sides of the canvas exposed. Johnson is an artist who doesn't shy away from engaging with the history of a space. She used the show in Glasgow, Barron Field, as an opportunity to comment on Kelvin Hall's colonial past as a host for various world fairs and circuses, and she is using Warm Ties, her current exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, to discuss British colonial history once again, with the arts centre situated as it is on The Mall – home to Buckingham Palace.

The reassessment of cultural, social and political histories lies at the core of Johnson's practice. Throughout my interview with her, I couldn't help but think of George Santayana's famous aphorism: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But it is one thing to remember the past, and another to reassess it. In the case of Britain's colonial relationship with Australia, Johnson feels that there hasn't been enough of a debate, especially in the west, concerning the true nature of Britain's imperialist past. This conversation is slowly building momentum in other parts of the world that were once occupied by British colonialists, with Indian author and politician Shashi Tharoor writing in an article for Al Jazeera earlier this month that there should be a museum in India that displays the truth of the British Raj – "a museum, in other words, to colonial atrocities".

There is a commendable sense of purpose to Johnson's paintings, but there is also an unwavering beauty. Purpose and beauty aren't synonymous in contemporary art, but Johnson manages to capture the attention of the viewer with one and hold that attention with the other. It is a powerful combination and it is a subject she discusses, among several other key questions regarding the practice of painting, in her book Painting is a Critical Form (2015). We sat down at the ICA to discuss her new exhibition, Warm Ties, and her practice.

**Alexander Glover: Could we start by discussing the historical content of the exhibition and the significance of the ICA's location in relation to it?**

**Helen Johnson:** With this show, I chose to draw on a lot of images that were published in the popular press rather than art-historical images. I mostly selected cartoons of colonists by other colonists that were published in the mid- to late-19th century. Some were published in Melbourne, the area of Australia in which I live, while others were published in the UK. I was looking for images that acknowledge the corruption, sycophancy and greed of colonial culture that, to me, were emblematic of the male modes of power that were taken to Australia by the British. That was the starting point; trawling through state archives looking for those images. I wanted to do that knowing that the show was going to be presented on The Mall – so close to Westminster and Buckingham Palace. It's a sort of freighting back of some of that imagery to this context from where it originated.

**AG: Did some of these cartoons originate from publications such as Punch?**

**HJ:** Yeah, definitely, some of them were from Punch. There was an Australian version of Punch.

**AG: What kind of topics did the Australian Punch select to satirise around the late-19th to early-20th century?**

**HJ:** There was a lot of poking fun at power structures. There's a piece in the exhibition called A Feast of Reason and a Flow of Soul (2016) that features a ring of men bribing each other and engaging in these sorts of rituals; illegally carving up land that they invaded. Those figures come from Punch cartoons that were taking the piss out of that level of official culture that tried to present an idea that British occupation of that country was legitimate.

**AG: Would you describe the paintings in this show as satirical?**

**HJ:** A lot of the source material I draw on is satirical. I wanted to resist presenting some sort of unified image of history, and I guess that's what I'm trying to situate the paintings against.

**AG: With regards to the form of the paintings, you have mentioned previously, in other interviews, that the length of the canvas as well as the way in which they are hung from the ceiling are suggestive of how we engage with imagery today through social media. How did you come to present the canvas the way you do?**

**HJ:** That's true; they're definitely suggestive of how we engage with imagery today through social media, as you get this sort of vertical read of the painting that is akin to scrolling down to view online images. I guess the scale of them is associated with the limits of my body and what I can deal with on my own. I sometimes have assistants in the studio and they can help me carry them around from time to time. It's important for me that the figures are life-sized in that they provide a way into the work. Even though the space they inhabit, particularly in this show, is this kind of

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white space where there are all these generic white figures of colonial power. At the same time that they're in this closed loop together [referring to A Feast of Reason and a Flow of Soul]: they're an access point into the work because they have this frankness about them and a parity to the viewer's body. I think as soon as you make the decision for the figures to be life-sized, it becomes a lot easier to expand the surface of the painting to accommodate them.

Hanging the paintings loose in the space has a strong reference, in my mind, to a theatre backdrop. They become something to encounter and to behold, but they're also something to stand or act in front of. I only recently started thinking about how, when I was a teenager, I was in charge of making backdrops for school plays and it was never something that I thought about as art. I do sometimes make much smaller paintings, too, without any figurative content.

**AG: How do you decide when to work on a smaller scale and in a more abstracted style?**

**HJ:** I like the different conversation that you have with a smaller painting; it's like talking to just one person. The large ones feel as if you're negotiating with a whole bunch of people. But that large-scale and figurative presence that the scale can afford seemed right to me for historical subjects.

**AG: When you exhibited your show Barron Field at Glasgow International 2016, you also presented paintings that were hung away from the walls with the backs of the paintings exposed. The backs usually feature inscriptions and sketches that often relate to the production of the front of the painting. Is the back as important as the front?**

**HJ:** The back is a different kind of space. I think it plays an important role through the fact that it's automatically seen as this sort of de-privileged space or something. It becomes almost like a rejoinder for the front of the piece. The notes on the backs of those works were more discursive and poetic. But the ones on the backs of these works are more of an explicit conversation. For instance, on the back of A Feast of Reason and a Flow of Soul, there is a drawing from a William Strutt painting. It's a painting depicting the burial of an explorer named Robert Burke who went on a trip that went wrong and he never made it back. He's presented as this tragic hero, but really they [the people in his expedition] were inept and failed to pay attention to what would have enabled them to survive. They prepared foods wrongly, for example. That image on the back is Burke receiving a state funeral, hastily wrapped in a union jack. They had to keep asserting their cultural authority. The ugliness of that past really needs to be thrown into question and acknowledged.

**AG: In a similar vein to the relevance of the ICA's location in relation to the focus of this show, the location of your show during Glasgow International 2016, Kelvin Hall, also held a special significance?**

**HJ:** That space has a really long history of hosting things such as world fairs and circuses, but had always been a space that celebrated cultural empires. For that show, I was interested in freighting these images back into the context from which they came, but more on an art historical level. I'm interested in how we have this canon that is understood in Australia and this whole set of artists that are understood as important yet relatively unknown around the world. I found it really intriguing to be in Glasgow, thinking about the latency of the signification of colonialism that's still around in the architecture.

**AG: Some of the works in this exhibition, such as the clothes featured in Impotent Observer (2016), feel as though you're observing the original material itself. How do you achieve this realistic impression?**

**HJ:** It's very simple. You put the paint down and when it's still wet, you push the clothing into it. I've got boxes and boxes of painted clothing in the studio from creating these figures. The figures are so flat in the way they're rendered, so everything about them is made by pushing something into them.

**AG: How do you decide when to paint in a more representative manner, and when to paint in a more illustrative or abstracted way?**

**HJ:** When I was younger, I used to work with people who I knew when I was dealing with the figure. But I found that there was this need for the image to have fidelity to this person and it was sort of in the realm of portraiture. I wasn't sure if this was a necessary part of what the works operations were. I did away with that and started extrapolating these figures from cartoons while often altering quite a lot to get them to read well on this human scale. I cobble figures together from many different sources so they're not people who exist in the world, they're more placeholder figures. I like that that enables my figures to get away from this portraiture reading, even though they're figurative.

**AG: Your work Seat Power (2016) sets the historical tone of the exhibition at the beginning and is a text-based work. What is the text referring to?**

**HJ:** The text is in relation to the Speaker's chair in parliament. When Old Parliament House was built in Canberra, Australia, in 1927, a replica of the Speaker's chair in the British House of Commons was made as a gift from the British parliament. That text describes the production of that replica in the most fetishistic terms and how they sourced the wood from the HMS Victory – one of Horatio Nelson's flagships. It describes the replica as having more oratorical potency than the original chair and there's this kind of reverence with this symbol of British rule that has been ushered across the sea. It's emblematic of a lot of things. The cartoon, which is sort of masked in and ripped out of that text, is a satirical cartoon of the House of Commons, with everyone just lying about and falling asleep.

**AG: You said in a previous interview that painting used to be synonymous with truth. Do you think contemporary painting has the capacity to have that sort of relationship again?**

**HJ:** There is a whole different set of potentials in which painting could relate to truth now. There's no expectation for painting to represent truth. But you can now deal with it reflexively by understanding it as a medium that has been instrumental in different ways over time, and now the baggage of that instrumentalisation can be put to use as part of the medium, I suppose. I wrote a thesis on aesthetic experience in painting and was talking about Martin Kippenberger. There's a particular painting of his that I often cite because of its relationship to truth: it's called With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika (1984). It was made at a time when the German state was promoting the idea of overcoming the past and that Germany was done with its Nazi past. A lot of artists, rightly, felt that was a dangerous attitude. You can't just sweep things under the rug. So Kippenberger made this painting and, on first encounter, it looks like a bad attempt at a cubist painting or something. Then you realise it's almost, but never quite completely, taking the form of a swastika. The German government had just outlawed the drawing of swastikas. It was Kippenberger's way of saying that you shouldn't think that you can get away from history so easily. It's always going to come back and bite you in the arse.

**AG: Is the message from the content of your work, and indeed through the history of your usual medium, that we cannot ignore histories but we shouldn't simply accept them?**

**HJ:** In Australia at the moment, the most important things happening culturally are concerned with indigenous critiques of colonialism. It's not necessarily my place, as a white woman, to represent these stories. But, at the same time, it's important for the white people of Australia to reflect on our own cultural foundations. Responsibility needs to be taken for the processes of rethinking the way things get represented, as there are so many problematic aspects of that history. I'd cite artists such as Jonathan Jones, Archie Moore and Hannah Donnelly, who is also a writer. There are heaps of indigenous artists in Australia making enduring and sophisticated work about this subject matter. I think it's really important to acknowledge that.

When people ask me about what's going in Australia and what's interesting, the first thing I refer to are the indigenous artists in Australia. If I, in my position, can provide visibility for those artists, that's a good thing, and I think they're doing really important work.

**AG: In Painting is a Critical Form, you discuss the effect of formal beauty that is associated with painting. What is the significance of formal beauty, and can this only be attributed to painting?**

**HJ:** Well, this show will go to Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, and then to Artspace in Sydney. I think it's going to be really interesting, particularly when it goes to Australia, to see what form it takes.

In terms of the next body of work, it's something that I'm just starting to pick away at. I'm not completely sure what will happen when I get back into the studio. But I rarely have predetermined ideas before I start working because it usually comes out during the process of making. I'll have to keep you posted.

• *Helen Johnson: Warm Ties is at the ICA, London, until 16 April 2017.*