

## Bibliomania: The Paintings of Victoria Reichelt

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Victoria Reichelt, *Collapse*, 2007, oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne.

Books are enshrined in the Western painting tradition. The walls of galleries around the world are adorned with them; enraptured faces bent over pages, open covers making lounging nudes more discrete, and piles of dusty spines situated near decaying flowers and leering skulls. It is perhaps no surprise that books have taken a prominent position in art – particularly in the genres of portraiture and still life – for books, as objects, can suggest an inward human subject, even in the absence of a figure. In recent times, a more specific use of text has arisen in painting. Panels of words, dictionary meanings and linguistic puns seem to be an inevitable consequence of conceptualism where the look of reading has been replaced by the act. The language of books can be a humanising force denoted in images of knowledge, sincerity, contemplation and even death. It is painting, perhaps more than any other artistic genre, which recognises the narrative possibilities of books.

Melbourne's Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts this month features the work of Victoria Reichelt who revisits the subject of books in her current series of realist paintings, *Bibliomania: The Bookshelf Portrait Project*. Reichelt has selected seven prominent Australian artists to paint through their bookshelves. While the artists themselves are not physically present, their books tell the stories of their art. Reichelt's works provide insight into how these artists shape and frame their practices through reference to broader issues in art and culture while simultaneously hinting at aspects of their personalities, interests and intellectual pursuits.

Reichelt has delved into the lives and arts of Michael Zavros, Donna Marcus, Abbey McCulloch, David Sequiera, Rod Bunter, V.R. Morrison and Alasdair McIntyre. Through their bookshelves we are invited to examine these artists

more closely. These paintings are strangely intimate and a little voyeuristic. Like the bathroom medicine cabinet, the bookshelf gives us a psychological profile of a person's tastes, desires and aspirations. It is an extension of their personal world made public, where the viewer is faced with both recognition of familiar titles and insightful observations as to the influences of their artworks.

There is limited interference by Reichelt in the arrangement of these libraries. The represented artists in many cases selected the books they wanted to epitomise their work. While Reichelt was careful to make sure there were clues to their identities, the shelves are captured basically as she found them. She notes that this is important as it gives some insight into the artists' personalities: 'Rod Bunter's books were perfectly arranged, his work is very precise and exact; whereas Abbey McCulloch's bookshelf is a bit haphazard, reflecting the spontaneity of her painting style'.<sup>1</sup>

The involvement of the artists in the display of their bookshelves could be seen as problematic, for it may suggest a mediated portrait open to subterfuge. However, if the staging of these books is interpreted as the pose of the sitter then further possibilities occur. In traditional portraiture the pose of the sitter may volunteer insights into the subject's personality or social position. In the case of Reichelt's works, the arrangement of books by the subject becomes a method of presenting a particular appearance or pose to the artist. This process thus further exposes the personality of the sitter in the absence of a figure. •

Reichelt's choice of title for her exhibition is a telling one. Bibliomania is the passion for the acquisition and display of books, which was a particularly Victorian phenomenon, and corresponds with the advent of the



mechanical printing press in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The collection of books in this period was frenzied and it is perhaps no coincidence that this was consistent with the proliferation of portraits depicting reading. For the Victorians, books were an outward show of learning and cultivation. However, the trend was for looking at books rather than actually reading them.<sup>2</sup> It is this aspect of bibliomania that connects to Reichelt's book paintings. Painted books are a paradox. Painting fails to capture the act of reading. The canvas is doomed to a recurrent frustration where the books are closed and narrative is removed from view, never to be read. It would seem that we can only look. Yet, a different narrative evolves. We can read them as objects, with histories and stories of their own, separate from the texts inside. Their titles and dust jackets provide us with clues about their owner's interests and preoccupations which can be both predictable and surprising, making them apt subject matter for portraiture.

Alasdair Macintyre is perhaps the most revealing of Reichelt's bookshelf paintings. The image is a chaotic jumble of art and popular culture. Cookie Monster surfs the cover of *The Secret World of 007*, Smurf figurines slide into the spine of *Rembrandt*, and *U2 by U2* takes a prominent place on the top shelf. There is humour here but also a sense of anxiety. Both Macintyre's small-scale *tableaux* and his bookshelf illustrate the artist's desire to play with the 'big boys' of art history in an irreverent manner. The artist's dioramas of *Star Wars* characters in high art settings exemplify this satire. Macintyre was involved in the selection and arrangement of the books for his portrait so it is of no surprise that his nostalgia for late '70s popular culture and child-like aesthetic are found here. However, we also catch glimpses of some of Macintyre's more personal concerns. The inclusion of books such as *Jesus and the Cosmos*, the biography of Mary MacKillop and a monk figurine suggest the important role that religion plays in Macintyre's life. Reichelt explains: 'His inclusion of a few religious books in the composition seemed right as he is a deeply religious person. It doesn't necessarily reference his work but I wanted to make sure he was represented accurately'.<sup>3</sup>

Conventional portraiture relies on the visual representation of the subject, where the physiognomy of the sitter attempts to lay claim to character. One need only consider the Archibald Prize to find what the common and popular conception of portraiture might look like. While a skillful likeness is often thought necessary for traditional portraiture, what is perhaps more important is for the painter to somehow capture temperament and personality, to make visible the ever elusive concept of identity. It is clear that Reichelt has the ability to render her subjects in mimetic realism even without the presence of the figure. However, she has set herself the further task of representing something of the artist's practice and conceptual concerns without relying on more established mechanisms, such as the studio environment, to provide this context.

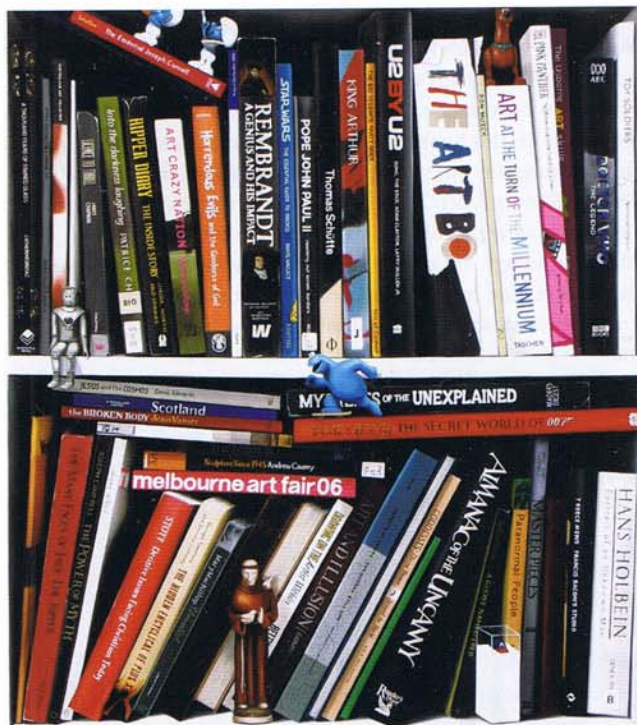
One of the most compelling aspects of Reichelt's paintings is the detailed information they contain, the connections to broader canons of thought. Portrait artist Abbey McCulloch's conceptual concerns are certainly laid bare in Reichelt's painting of her bookshelf. Pile upon pile of

fashion magazines are a clear reference point for the glamorous yet vulnerable women who grace McCulloch's canvases. McCulloch's paintings address the complexities of the female experience, as indicated most directly and personally in the book title *Women, Creativity and the Arts*, while asking the question posed on another book spine, *What is Beauty?* McCulloch comes from a post-feminist era where it is now possible to paint the female experience without apology. It is clear that as an artist she recognises this; where else but on her bookshelf would *Playboy* and pin-up girls sit in juxtaposition with Taschen's pictorial celebration of women artists and monographs of Marlene Dumas and Eve Hesse? Reichelt makes these paradoxes obvious in her painting, so inviting the viewer to revisit the vacant stares of McCulloch's girls and think about the contradictions of female representation.

Books are a long-term interest for Reichelt, featuring in exhibitions such as *Books* (2004) at Metro Arts, *The Reading Room* (2005) at John Gordon Gallery, and *Library* (2005) at Dianne Tanzer Gallery. (Books are also her subject in work contributed to Dianne Tanzer's upcoming Melbourne Art Fair exhibit.) Reichelt's previous paintings have included interesting compositions of these objects within the frames of stark white backgrounds and dark wooden shelves. In some instances their visual appeal lies in their almost sculptural rendering. Books are piled haphazardly atop one another, pages flutter, spines are creased and jackets are tattered and worn. These images are every librarian's nightmare, with no logic or system of collection. Other paintings recognise the book's potential for narrative. Titles are carefully chosen and juxtaposed to suggest links between subject matter, raising numerous questions and associations. For example, *Who runs this place?* depicts titles such as *Russia*, *Warpaths* and Noam Chomsky's *Failed States*. Their arrangement is a precarious one, a tower of books that could collapse at any moment, suggesting the fragility of the human condition. In works such as this, Reichelt investigates the book for its ability to say something about the world around us, to muse on nostalgic memories of childhood or reveal latent truths about ourselves. It is this version of the book that the artist has continued to investigate in her current series of paintings.

Reichelt's portrait of fellow realist painter Michael Zavros tells the narrative of his artistic interests to date. His bookshelf includes titles such as *Baroque*, *International Men's Fashion*, *Luxury Equestrian Design* and a number of *National Geographic* magazines. Zavros is well known for his exquisitely rendered images of horses, European interiors, men in sharp suits and more recently elaborate birds. It is clear that Zavros's artistic interests are varied, what is consistent is the sense of order, discipline and seriousness in his bookshelf which underlies his practice. Reichelt is careful to remind us of these connections, wanting to represent each of Zavros's series of paintings so as to give the viewer a clue to the bookshelf's owner. However, what is perhaps most indicative of Zavros's work in Reichelt's painting is the apparent absence of Zavros himself. Zavros's bookshelf gives little indication to personal tastes or desires, it seems somehow cool and detached. Similarly, his paintings carefully cover their tracks, there is no sign of the





TOP: Victoria Reichelt, *Arthur Macintyre*, 2008, oil on canvas, from the *Bibliomania* series. Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne. ABOVE: Alasdair Macintyre, *A Short History of Head Wear - The Last Artist*, 2006, polyurethane resin, polymer clay, cardboard, paper, inkjet print, acetate, acrylic paint, wood. Collection of Queensland University of Technology Art Museum. Courtesy the artist and Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane; Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney.

artist's hand in his work. The photographic and mechanical aspects of Zavros' paintings act as a distancing mechanism which appears equally present in his bookshelf.

Reichelt's process is a painstaking one. Each image begins as a carefully arranged collection of objects photographed in a controlled studio environment. From here she reproduces her images on canvas and renders them carefully with oil paint. Reichelt claims that the act of

photographing objects is just as important to her practice as painting them. Like many artists before her, including Gerhard Richter and Glenn Brown, Reichelt engages very directly in the relationship between painting and photography. Theorists such as Yve-Alain Bois have described the rise of photography as 'the death of painting'. While ongoing debate has raged as to the validity of this idea, Reichelt takes the stance that realist painting has learnt to embrace photography instead of seeing it as a threat.<sup>4</sup> From this position, Reichelt's work serves as an investigation into the act of painting through the tools of photography. The most obvious example of this relationship within Reichelt's work was her 2007 exhibition *Focus* at Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne. This exhibition revolved around the detailed painting of numerous antique cameras, perhaps suggesting the decline of traditional photography to the advantage of its digital counterpart, as well as the assimilation of photography into painting where it becomes the subject of painting, quite literally.

While the fusion of the painting/photography dichotomy is perhaps less relevant to the subject matter of her *Bibliomania* series, its relationship is still relevant to her process. Its importance to her style of realism is obvious, but we might also recognise that photography has had a profound and lasting impact on the genre of portraiture. The tradition of representing the subject according to mimetic resemblance assured the viewer of continued iconicity through photography when avant-garde painting refused to be bound by the empirical image. Reichelt's work thus plays a strange circular game where she employs the tools of photography to make paintings of people, through objects, so reinforcing the interconnectivity of painting, photography and perhaps even object-based art.

In fact, Reichelt shares some characteristics with the many contemporary artists who incorporate found objects within their works, in her penchant for the defunct and superseded, the banal and everyday items that are often overlooked. Her paintings have variously revered objects from typewriters and cassette players to old tin toys and board games. These works seem to mourn the loss of once beautiful and useful items. There is a nostalgic element which fondly remembers the significance such objects might have had before their decline into oblivion. Many of Reichelt's previous book paintings share this sense of nostalgia for the beauty of the overlooked and commonplace. Her portraits however recognise the importance people invest in books. It would seem that this sentiment is still reflected by society as a whole. The recent release of electronic book readers such as the *Amazon Kindle* has led to a flurry of letters to the editor and online forums from book lovers who refuse to give up the experience of printed words on a page. Despite ever improving technology, the



## Eddie Kneebone *Bones of Contention*

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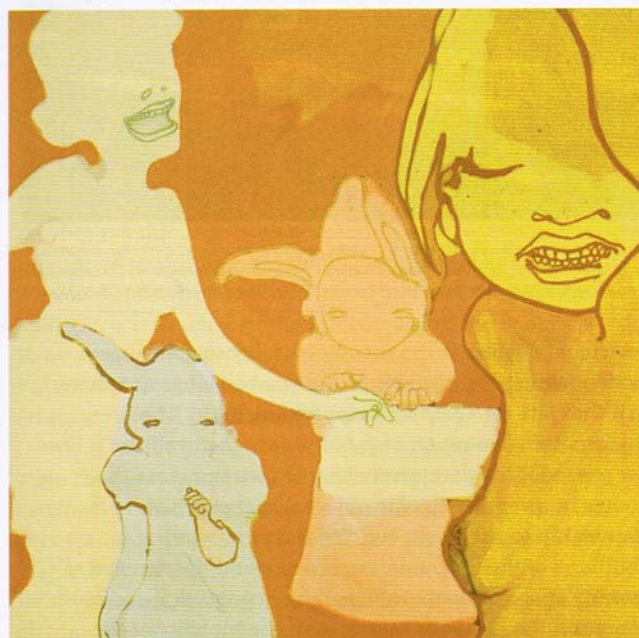
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IMAGE: Eddie Kneebone, *Bones of Contention* 2007 (detail), acrylic on canvas. Collection of Wodonga Institute of TAFE





TOP: Victoria Reichelt, *Abbey McCulloch*, 2007, oil on canvas, from the *Bibliomania* series. Courtesy the artist and Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne.  
 ABOVE: Abbey McCulloch, *The Pretender* (detail), 2008, oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Helen Gory Galerie, Prahran, Victoria.

modern codex book format, which has been around since the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, continues to be valued.

This love for books is clearly celebrated in Reichelt's paintings; their continued relevance to our lives and our personalities is not lost. Their importance to the artist cannot be overestimated for we see through each of Reichelt's portraits their significance to studio practice and to knowing more of art and artists. While art would continue to exist without books, it would be a form of subsistence for books are so often the sources of images, ideas and imagination. Reichelt's portraits make clear that at one time or another, each of her chosen artists have turned to their bookshelves for information if not inspiration, whether it be Donna Marcus's reverence for Buckminster Fuller, Rod Bunter's requisite graphic design source books or V.R Morrison's infatuation with the Belle Epoque.

While we learn much about these artists through their bookshelf portraits, we also gain insight into Reichelt. Her selection of artists to paint is interesting, for they each share something in common with her. Bunter and Macintyre's sense of nostalgia, Zavros's and Morrison's realist renderings, McCulloch's ability to capture identity and Marcus's and Sequeira's fondness for collecting are also present within Reichelt's practice. One can't help but wonder what her own bookshelf might look like.

## Notes

1. Victoria Reichelt in email conversation with the author, 2008.
2. Philip Connell, 'Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain', *Representations* 71, 2000, p. 25.
3. Victoria Reichelt in email conversation with the author, 2008.
4. Victoria Reichelt, *Painting's Wrongful Death*, Digital Thesis, Griffith University, 2005.

Victoria Reichelt's *Bibliomania: The Bookshelf Portrait Project* is showing at Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, Melbourne, 15 August to 14 September 2008. Reichelt will also be representing Dianne Tanzer Gallery at the 2008 Melbourne Art Fair, Royal Exhibition Building, July 30 to August 3, 2008.

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