

Ornamental Noise

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In any field attempting to represent our world, a phenomenon known as the uncanny valley occurs; a liminal space in which an image becomes so lifelike we no longer respond to it positively. It becomes creepy, *too real*. Curiously, humans are not alone in this preference abstraction over the real. A recent study of herring gulls also yielded evidence of this 'natural disrespect for good form'¹. Baby gulls do not respond to realistic 'decoy' mother birds; they respond better to abstract forms adorned with an exaggerated red spot (the colour of the mother's beak). Through abstraction, the gulls experience something more akin to reality than a direct facsimile can deliver.

What does this relationship with abstraction tell us about the way we experience our world? In her new body of work Connie Anthes delves into this conceptual territory. *Ornamental Noise* is a collection of 12 paintings and a series of inflatable sculptures. It explores pareidolia, the phenomenon of seeing faces or bodies in inanimate objects. The *Untitled* series of paintings initially appear as hyperreal portraits of geologic samples. Looking at them, however, they begin to take on other forms, shape-shifting like clouds.

For those not naturally inclined to pareidolic flights of fancy, the works' subtitles push us gently towards them (*Copper Portrait / Bjork*, for example, or *Asbestos Portrait #2 / Bowie*). Pareidolia is a particular type of apophenia, the seeing of patterns in randomness. It's an experience most common in religious narrative – think Jesus Toasties, the Shroud of Turin or Sydney's very own Virgin Mary fencepost above Coogee Beach. But there is far more to be taken from Anthes' segue into the phenomenon than ecclesiastic oddities. The emergence of order from chaos (or in this case faces from rocks), hints at a deeper ontological project.

In our tendency to order and reorder sense data, we contribute to a process of creation that underlies everything we see, do, feel and understand. Anthes' practice has dealt with perceptual quirks and the ways in which we look, see and compose for several years. *Ornamental Noise* continues to evoke this process, using real subject matter to push towards the abstract. This simultaneous seeing and 'unseeing' of subjects in the paintings is echoed in the inflatables. This time, however, the movement activating the work is towards abstraction of the human form.

Anthes has painstakingly unpicked 20 white full body hazmat suits, reforming the same 10 pieces into amorphous inflatable sculptures while on site. The suits have become bodies-without-organs, undifferentiated bodies from which infinite forms may spontaneously emerge. To look at the reformed hazmat suits is to imagine arms and legs, but also to invoke other shapes and purposes they could have had. It is to see the real and the imagined simultaneously, a real and imagined that both emerge from the abstract.

Anthes brings these movements towards and away from abstraction to the fore through her materials. Indeed, the most prominent movement at play in *Ornamental Noise* is that of oscillation: between rock and face; the hard edges of the paintings and the softness of the inflatables; between representation and abstraction; body and un-done body; the virtual and the actual. The lovingly rendered portraits of elemental rocks and the gently billowing sculptural works invite not only engagement via worldly senses. Through their abstraction they also invite imagination, the contemplation of all possible worlds.

Abstraction, as the humble herring gull hints at, is not dilution or obstruction of reality; it constitutes it. Artaud once wrote: *When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom*². What we know always follows what we untangle from abstraction. *Ornamental Noise* does not tell us what to see; rather it demonstrates the power of suggestion itself.

¹ Brian Massumi (2011). *Into the Diagram*, lecture at Artspace Sydney.

² Antonin Artaud (1947). *To Have Done With the Judgement of God (A play for radio)*