

A conversation between artists Milli Jannides and Raafat Ishak about the relation of their exhibitions - *Zig Zag Trail* and *Collaborations (1998 - 2015)* at TCB Art Inc., June 2015. Mediated by Ry Haskings.

Ry: After speaking with a group of RMIT masters students about the shows (from what knowledge I had) I came across an interesting relation between the two shows.

On the one hand Raafat, your show looked as though it were one highly ordered and constructed work drawn from the clear and tightly organised vision of one artist/ or curator due to its installation - although it contained disparate pictorial entities that identified the grouping of collaborations involved

And, Milli your exhibition seemed to feature a disparate series of paintings that although appeared to reference a similar sentiment, all could have been made by a group of different painters. As well as that, I had the insight of seeing the canvas supports from behind as I hung the show and noticed the varying stretchers used that seemed to amplify this.

I guess these observations can be contextualised by an interest of the seemingly fluid position of the author.

Raafat: Ry, in response to your comment, yes the installation was highly constructed and highly ordered. Yet, it reflected a disparate group of 4 collaborations which are not in themselves highly constructed or ordered, or even purposeful in the scheme of my or my collaborators' practices. What I installed was purposefully arranged, in a corner in the manner of a storage unit arrangement or a bookshelf, containing objects that are not activated but organised with the vision for future activations/ realisations. Each collaboration has been highly speculative anyway, working with suggestive and referential conceptual underpinnings and materials that serve to publicise and disseminate those concerns. It seemed appropriate that the TCB show acknowledged the existence of these collaborations by presenting them as a tight display set, awaiting future re-activation and continuation. It also seemed appropriate to explore the overlays and cross referencing that I thought already occurred between the 4 collaborations, through the process of a highly constructed display. This strategy many have diminished the presence of the other artists in the works and instead highlighted a singular artist interpretation of the sum of the entire body of collaborations.

Ry: At this point I was thinking of deflecting this really interesting observation to Milli about the idea of the exhibition's installation as a bookshelf, where elements or works are organised. Added to this point seemed to be a question of how this organisational context activates objects in the present and the future. Milli, in regards to your work in the exhibition, do you consider your conglomerate of paintings through similar terms and/or questions?

Milli: From not being able to see the exhibition in person I am limited as to how much I can comment on context and your familiarity with the space and audience is really interesting to hear.

Raafat, I enjoyed your description of the bookshelf and storage unit presentation strategy. Firstly because it seemed to sidestep a model of exhibition that assumes artworks, if installed correctly, should activate each other. I have been in a few situations where my paintings were/were not activating other works in the way that the artist/curator wanted, and in those moments I was bemused. Installation became a shield we all had to use so as not think of the work itself, to think of the exhibition perhaps – a sort of ‘don’t look at the sun’ situation, or even worse, an over-thinking approach resulting in another kind of blind spot (overlooking). It sounds as though perhaps you took the responsibility, sometimes thrust upon artworks during installation, upon yourself.

What I was interested in was how you flipped ‘tightly’ (as in a tightly curated show) into ‘compactly’. A bookshelf and a storage unit are organised functionally, to varying degrees. A bookshelf usually arranges books so the spines can be seen, not necessarily in alphabetical order, and a storage unit is stacked so the contents don’t damage each other over time, or as tightly (economically) as possible, or so that some objects can be accessed first. Bookshelves and storage units usually contain objects that have been used – there is a past as well as a future, but the fact of keeping the contents in an organised manner suggests a belief in future use, which is similar but perhaps slightly less conscious than the archival impulse. I wonder if you think about archives. I was also prompted to think about what happens whilst things are in storage – I imagine something both mysterious and everyday, aka time passing.

In terms of my own work I try to keep hold of a sense of possibility as long as possible (oil painting being a medium for the seemingly non-committal). For me this possibility is in the present and the future, as you mentioned Ry, but also the past. A work made in the future can change work in the past by shaping/shifting the narrative. I am interested in the ‘making sense’ of an artwork happening by osmosis and I approach making without a clear sense of direction. As to the stylistic differences you mention, it has never been important to me to make works that are recognisably me, but nor do I purposefully not (apart from occasionally feeling very contrary in studio). During the making of the work there is very much an autobiographic tone: I am alone in the studio, the paintings are stretched and primed and painted by me, the subjects are idiosyncratically personal, and then I think ‘I’ disappear in the end, which might have an element of the cowardly lion to it, but also might be a chance for the paintings to be brave. The other thing to say about the differences between the works is that the paintings are each self-contained, in that I do not work in series, although I might use a source more than once. I am always hoping to make the work that will change my own work.

And a last thought more specifically about this exhibition, I know that I was originally invited as a sort of opposite to Raafat, and I wonder whether you think this initial impulse remained and what it offered to an audience?

Raafat: Continuing on the theme of storage/shelving, there was a certain responsibility which I felt towards the works I was using, mostly because of the absence of the other artists in the install but more so, because the objects themselves are very specific to thoughts, ideas and projections that can only be activated through the participation of those artists. It seemed to make sense to

present them as objects in waiting, in a state of apnea, forced breathlessness, a crowd of objects, compact, as you suggest, and perhaps physically tight, accounting for as little space as possible. They are not really archival in the sense that they are not representative, they are lacking the contribution of my collaborators to make them active and engaged. Yet, once they are removed from the exhibition context, they do operate as remnants or shreds, sometimes as remembered impulses or as actual objects stored in the corner of the studio. This is perhaps as close as I can get to describing the installation as a whole. I do keep in mind that each of the collaborations is very different. One is entirely predicated on producing auxiliary material. Another is ephemeral in nature and scope. Another was a short lived, time-relevant joke and the other was based entirely on a meandering conversation that never ended.

Milli, I didn't actually think that your paintings looked like they were done by different artists, or had obvious stylistic and formatting differences, not that I think style as signature matters. I found the work impulsive, which I think is characteristic of painting in a general way. I helped Ry to unpack them and was intrigued by the differences of the supports. Yet, I took that as a strategic, if seemingly impulsive way of working. Having said that, I don't think it's a formula as such. My practice is a predominantly painting practice. I work in series and use exactly the same format for each series. Yet, I share exactly the same impulse, first, of not knowing exactly what I'm doing, then by iterating that exact same thing which I did not know at the first place, in the same hope that what I am making will both change me as a person and change what I will be doing next. The series are self contained and propose narratives that change with time, or with the making of another series.

Lastly, and in anticipation of Ry's response to your final point, I think differences (as in you being my opposite in TCB's initial plan) are intrinsically superficial. I thought your work resonated with my thinking about art in general and about painting in particular, not that anyone would guess from appearances, and not to assume that mine resonates with you either. What interested me the most, aside from both installations, was the fact that my initial response to the exhibition proposition, was to collaborate with you, or at least mix the two spaces up rather than have two separate shows. I was curious about your choice to show a group of paintings on your own, in your own room. I thought this was a good decision, and took it as an understanding that collaborations don't just occur, particularly over a long distance, and between two people who don't know each other. I think this minor realisation led me to testing my own existing collaborations without the artists who I collaborate with. So in some obscure and unmitigated way, my show was in direct response to what you were planning to do.

Ry: In regards to my initial observation as a result of brief discussions with students about the two shows and my recollection of why TCB chose to show you and Milli together, it wasn't really about opposites. I guess this observation was introduced as an attempt to highlight some differences (work by one and work by several collaborations) but also similarities in regards to how I felt you were both dealing with this sense of collection, as has been discussed through terms such as the bookshelf, archive, storage unit and shelf. When TCB were deciding to pair the shows together I remember discussions about architecture and interiors as some form of meeting point between your practices, more so Raafat's solo painted works. Although differences again were discussed in regards to the graphic hard edge nature of Raafat's work beside the more gestural approach of Milli's. This is of course a brief and superficial reading, but provides a way for the large group of TCB committee members to find a way into both your practices. Obviously you both have other

modes of making that could come into play, but looking at both of your approaches through painting merely allowed us to conceive a starting point that could unfold however it may for the exhibition. Although, this is not a haphazard approach and we would have been satisfied, as we are we are with most decided pairings, that like minded people would display work that will have a good opportunity to resonate with one another whatever decisions they made about their shows.

Raafat reflects on a really interesting point about an early discussion the two of us had had about his proposal to instigate a more collaborative approach between the front and backspace exhibitions, which was later passed onto you Milli. I could be wrong but at the time I got the sense that this approach of yours Raafat was a way to utilise TCB Gallery's project and experimental based opportunities for exhibiting and to test this idea we had received funding for which sought to couple artists/ curators that were known with those maybe lesser known in the Melbourne art community. Our idea was based on the possibilities of dialogue that may occur between the two and historically the relationship between exhibitions of older and younger artists that we have paired (often without a thought for age, that as an idea only would emerge as the exhibition was up) and when the gallery was divided in two as TCB (artist run) and Uplands (commercial). We were further interested in how it could also be played out literally in a document of sorts between the parties like this. To draw upon what you have said Milli, and this may be a stretch or inappropriate looking from a programming perspective, but an exhibition by an artist that is lesser known to a particular locale ("work made in the future") "can change" the context of an exhibition of an artists work who is known to that locale ("work in the past") "by shaping/shifting the narrative" of a gallery's program. These two distinguished categories are commonly articulated separately from one another (as I am also doing now for the sake of investigating it), in writing (established, emerging, local, international etc) and there was an interest in pursuing links between known and lesser known to the Melbourne art community and that maybe these categories require constant re evaluation and that richer gains for individuals and the art community may be made in the process.