

Living Space

Simon Morris
Brenda Sullivan





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In Conversation with
Claudia Arozqueta











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On August 8th artists Simon Morris and Brenda Sullivan, and Curator Claudia Arozqueta, had a conversation at Enjoy Gallery, attempting to bring forward several ideas connected to the exhibition *Living Space*. They sat in the furniture created by Morris especially for the exhibition with cup of tea in hand. All was set to have a comfortable chat during the morning, in the gallery turned minimal living room.

CA Claudia Arozqueta
SM Simon Morris
BS Brenda Sullivan

CA Why do you both use abstraction as a visual language?

SM I've only ever worked with abstraction since art school. The kind of abstraction that was happening there back in the 1980's was more formalist, and it was a really good way to learn how to make paintings. There was obviously a connection with form and colour, but over the years I've needed to enrich my work. I started a process of turning that earlier interest into a visual language that could connect abstraction with architecture and objects, and in doing that I started to think about how we live in spaces and occupy time. Abstraction has become a way of exploring and enjoying the world and I like that there is something I have a very strong response to but can't explain completely with language.

BS I work with abstraction because although it has a reputation of detached formality, to me, it is that blankness and ambiguity that allows people to take their own interpretations and experiences to it. I have always found representational work to demand a particular way of viewing that doesn't hold the same capacity for seeing and being with space. Like Simon, I view abstract imagery as having the potential to be seen as a part of life, it's that essentialism that comes with abstraction that I like.

CA Your mutual interest in furniture caught my attention. Simon, you told me that your grandfather was involved in the design of furniture and you were remaking some of it. Brenda, the works that you presented during the CRITweek at Massey University in 2011 connected wall paintings with furniture. When I invited you to make furniture, Simon, I was interested in how your systemic painting method

would be translated into a 3D object, and how Brenda's wall paintings would respond to it.

SM I've made two other pieces of furniture as artwork. For an exhibition called Constructive Colour at Artspace in Sydney I made a bench shaped in the form of the gallery floor plan that encouraged viewers to contact the material, and observe the shape of the gallery's internal volume. I've made a similar piece upstairs in this building when it was New Work Studio. It was based on the three-dimensional space; the end walls, the ceiling and the steel structure added for earthquake strengthening. Again, the bench became a place to observe the space from. My father and grandfather worked together in the design and construction of modern furniture in the fifties and I have been gathering some of it, and remaking some from drawings. Claudia, I am glad that you picked up on that shared interest between Brenda and I; I saw this as an opportunity to make something which kind of 'sat' across a range of interests, from furniture to installation and wall drawing. I didn't really want to make something that was functional, I wanted furniture that was more like the idea of furniture, so I probably should have titled this show something more like 'draft living space'. I see this work more as drawings rather than completely functional pieces that will exist over time.

BS I am conscious of your use of the word 'sat' Simon, I know you use it here in a metaphysical sense, it is the way furniture sits in the room in quite a different way than pictorial imagery that I wish to piggyback off. It is what an abstract shape on a vertical wall has to say to something in the third





dimension that activates another kind of abstraction to me. Like almost 'seeing' the abstraction of thought itself. To be able to feel the presence of the relationship, I find quite exciting.

SM Yes, I think of the two pieces of furniture I mentioned earlier; because they connected with the real shape of the space, they were treating abstraction as a kind of derivation of the real form rather than an abstraction in its own right, as such. These pieces here in *Living Space*, come from a more pure abstraction.

CA Simon, you mentioned that you didn't want to create functional pieces; but I suppose the boundaries between art, craft and design have always been foggy. One of the arguments is that design is functional and art isn't. But art has functionality as well: it has functioned for decorative, religious and political purposes throughout history.

SM It is a very simple process, wall drawings don't work as independent painted objects the way discrete paintings do, neither are they purely decorative works within architectural space, but in the way Brenda and I engage in them they are there strike up some kind of conversation with the architecture. I see furniture in this context in a similar way; it is one component in this extended space where humans engage.

BS Yes, it supports us in the way we go about our lives, as an accessory for us as well as an intrinsic part of our spacio-temporal experience.

CA There is a connection between Group Architects and the installation that you created for *Living Space*?

SM I am interested in modernist architectural history in New Zealand, my father was a practicing architect, he studied in the fifties. Many of the conversations we had growing up were based more in architecture than contemporary art; we found we had more of a common language there. I am very engaged by photographs of modern houses, interiors and exteriors, and there was one particular image which has always been floating around for me; an interior shot of the dining room of First House built in 1949 by Group Architects. In that image there is a wall drawing, probably called a mural back then but something we understand as wall drawing now; pieces that engage with material, physical and conceptual aspects of architectural space. It was made by Anthony Treadwell, an architect who is associated with Group Architects. The dining chairs and table in the photo were made by another of Group Architects, Allan Wild. His chair was very simple, made from planes of timber and the dining table was made from a door with simply turned legs. I was attracted by the idea that the architects designed and constructed the house, they made decorative elements like the wall drawing, and they made the furniture as well. This approach thinks through living spaces in a holistic way; which comes out of historic design processes from the Arts and Craft movement in New Zealand and the Bauhaus in Europe. It gave me a way into thinking about myself as a painter and how I could engage in making forms as well, and here I deliberately haven't collaborated with a furniture designer. In a way these are quite awkward forms as far as refined furniture goes, but they have sensibilities that are common with my paintings, bringing

ideas about form, material and process into play. In particular the division of space, referring to Donald Judd in a way, by using halves, quarters, thirds, but also based on a module. When I decided to make this work out of timber, I found a panel available here in Wellington that was a module measuring eighteen hundred by six hundred by nineteen millimetres. This was my second point of contact with Group Architects in that they chose to work with standard building modules to reduce waste in their houses; signalling the move toward conventions such as modular planning.

CA The idea of having a design approach that includes intelligent use of resources is often related with Modernist aesthetics. Modernism advocates for simplicity and efficiency in forms. In New Zealand, Group Architects followed those ideals, they eliminated ornamentation, and they used light and local materials, such as timber. They were aiming to form architecture without copying international models but by creating living spaces that were appropriate for New Zealand. This connection with the landscape and environment can be found also in Japanese architecture, which is considered as a reference of modernism. Simon, your work could refer us to Japanese aesthetics because of its simplicity, the use of materials, the modular structures, but especially because the floor-level height of the furniture that allows a different perspective of the space.

SM I wanted to make the height of the chairs quite an issue by lowering the seating position; to alter the way we usually sit in chairs so that we feel our body connecting with materials and form. I wanted also to allow the viewer of the gallery to perceive the space in a slightly different way; it changes



the attention we give to the ceiling, and the windows; we see more of the sky and less of the car park, and also the wall drawing. Brenda has carefully thought through the height of the wall drawing; she has responded to some of the issues that we have been talking about, and I wanted the chairs to be a vantage point from which to view it; to accentuate issues around the placement and scale of that work. There's an issue of equity of form, I didn't want either the wall drawing or the furniture to be props for the other.

CA Brenda, your wall painting also allows us to see the space in a different way; it makes the quiet aspects of the gallery visible.

BS I liked the idea that we would exhibit together, where the works would be in relation to each other, and that they would also operate separately. I have lived in Japan and am very comfortable with their expression of grounded space and their minimalist aesthetic. Within this work is the possibility of fixed measurement operating with fluid measurement, of a pluralist mind-set around a pairing of any sort. While I was waiting for the furniture to be made I was responding to the room itself, and thinking about Luciana Parisi's book, "Contagious Architecture. Computation, Aesthetics and Space" which I had just begun reading; and it bothered me that the room wasn't quite square. It's proportions seemed out of whack. I knew that Simon often modulated spaces in half, then half, then half again. So when I heard that he had broken this rule to build the bookcase by using not a symmetrical, but an on-going measurement that crawls around its side, I picked up on that manner of measurement as abstractly

relating somehow to my compulsion to redraw the dimensions of the room, to equalize the lengths of the two walls by redefining the middle. The other significant thing about the drawing is the height of it. I like that Simon's furniture is very low, and grounded, that they bring us to ground. To make a wall painting there is always the vertical plane to acknowledge, and I liked the potential here for the drawing to also engage with the horizontal plane of the floor and the low furniture.

SM We also decided to sand back and recoat the floor of the gallery quite deliberately to accentuate the basic components of the space – the walls, the floor, the ceiling and the windows. And that becomes, in a way, a part of the clarification of form. We see the coat of varnish as a kind of paint element really, although it's quite intensely coloured by the wood, we understand varnishing as a painted layer as we might understand a wall drawing or a monochrome painting, although it's achromatic, there's still a sense of this kind of painted film across the surface. It is suggesting a connection between introduced elements like the wall drawing and existing elements like the architecture here.

CA You both work with self-restrictions and systemic measurements?
SM I've used systems or sets of self-imposed constraints with my work for a long time. It becomes a way of working; however, the idea is to push at the boundaries and to let a systematic idea run its course irrespective of any aesthetic judgements. The process, or my application of it can rupture the system, and that becomes the surprise, you don't know how it's going to break. So it is a way of experimenting and discovering new form. I think there are patterns and ideas

about sequencing and measurement that have come out of my painting into this furniture, but in a way these are also quite conventional objects. They aren't like a wall drawing that might extend beyond its system and break down in some way, I think they've tended to be quite fixed forms.

CA I read your installation more like a drawing. It's interesting how the waste material from the system that you have used is enhancing the drawing character in the furniture.

SM Sure, and I think that that's one of the enjoyable things about working in a collaborative group that includes you, Claudia, that different ways of thinking come into play. I suppose that was the quirk that upset the system I was using.

CA The reason why I suggested to place the waste material on the table was because I thought the gesture could close the organic cycle.

SM Yes, I was wondering what to do with it. How could it be more relevant in this project than just being left over? People have used these bits of timber to discover the division within all three pieces as a kind of measuring device.

CA Let's talk about how monochrome is present in the space?

BS For me, just as the monochrome emphasises the material nature of painting, and paint as a substance, I see the same agency at play in Simon's use of wood.

SM There is a complex and diverse history to monochrome, stretching back to start of Modernism, that encompasses a range of persuasions from the exploration of ideal form through to a more matter of fact deployment of colour and shape that points to the spatial context and the here and now. I see Brenda's use of the monochrome as a component that enlivens the space and points back to,





I suppose, the viewer occupying these spaces and being aware not just of the painting or the furniture but a more holistic kind of experience and a connection to other people, the amount of time they might spend in here contemplating, observing these things and so on.

CA I think that the work is bringing attention to the materiality of the space, to how it is constituted. It makes us realise its limits and differences, opening it to new readings that go beyond the quotidian.

SM There was a deliberate act to try and slow people down to allow for a different kind of experience than going about daily activities. We wanted a slower space, a more contemplative space.

BS I think that's one of the ways that monochromatic works succeed. In their reductiveness they draw us right down to the edge or limit of something and bizarrely it opens up another space where you see a whole other level of subtlety, as if you're stepping into another plane that is much more open.

SM That's a really interesting point:, we're dealing with abstraction in another way, not in a form that removes every day content but introduces it at a different temperature.

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