



Kathy Temin: Forest of memories

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IN 1994, KATHY TEMIN EXHIBITED *A Monument to the Birds*, a suite of tombstone-like slabs of concrete at the base of a twenty-six-metre-long holly hedge, originally planted as a resting place for birds in Heide's resplendent garden. Temin drew images of Australian birds onto the slabs of concrete animating their dense surface with beaks and webbed feet like gravestones for forgotten fauna. Fifteen years later, Temin's vast opus resides indoors, filling Heide Museum of Modern Art with an array of sculptures, installations, wall-drawings, glass and felt pictures, photographs, films and videos of performances. Curators Sue Cramer and Jason Smith have assembled close to fifty works from the past twenty years. The domestic scale of Heide's galleries and the tumultuous history of John and Sunday Reed is an apt context for Temin's carefully configured habitats and environments.

Nowadays, Temin works out of a studio cooperative in Melbourne's Northcote alongside Stuart Ringholt, Robert Owen, Viv Miller, Jeph Neale and Carolyn Eskdale to name a few. A Toyota sewing machine takes prime position on a table in Temin's studio, near rows of books – *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama*, *Minimalism*, *The Texture of Memory*, *Elle decoration* and *Room for the seventies* attesting to her longstanding preoccupation with women artists, memory and décor. *A Monument to the Birds* was the first of a series of sculptures engaging with the notion of memory and commemoration through unconventional materials. At present, Temin is either busily sewing seams for a massive forest of black, furry and striated trees for Anna Schwartz

Gallery, or sitting amidst a miniature maquette of Heide with tiny cutouts of her works. A clue to her fascination with bulbous forms is evident in a tiny photo of cacti: hard, prickly and menacing plants that she deftly softens into stuffed forms.

Perched on top of Temin's bookshelf is a model for her installation *My Monument: White Forest* (2008/2009) – Temin's mammoth and highly-lauded contribution to the exhibition *Optimism* at GOMA, Queensland Art Gallery. Temin almost always prepares maquettes as a way of reconciling scale and placement. Reconfigured for Heide, this white, maze-like indoor garden contains benches for reflection as well as pathways through daunting yet comforting synthetic trees. In some ways, the enveloping minimalism of *My Monument: White forest* is a companion work to *My Monument: Black Cube* (2009) with its dense black and impenetrable funereal forest of synthetic fur. The colour black can signal mourning, marking the memory of deceased. Temin has been interested in Sol LeWitt's *Black Form – Dedicated to the Missing Jews* (1987/1989), commemorating the missing Jewish community of Munster, permanently installed as a 5.5 metre-long black cuboid that expresses a painful absence.

Temin's trees and habitat sculptures recur like childhood remnants taking us into a world of fairytale dwellings and forests. Secure yet menacing, the scale of Temin's unsettling habitats is askew. Her forest motif reminds us of Brothers Grimm fairytales that were written in the 1800s as tales of talking animals and treacherous journeys often deploying fear as a method of moral instruction. The forest can act as a metaphor for escape and loss: a jungle of our own projections. Moreover, the forest was a place of hiding, death marches and escape in Holocaust history.

Temin's father and stepfather were Holocaust survivors and she has actively sought to reconstruct her familial history. More recently, she has travelled to memorial sites in Eastern Europe visiting Holocaust memorials and concentration camps such as Majdanek and Sachsenhausen. She also participated in the Adult March of



the Living for the children of survivors to mark the memory of their family: recollection is central to this pilgrimage.¹ Temin wanted to translate the smallness she felt within the vastness of concentration camps, often surrounded by beautifully verdant forests. Her father was a tailor who recognised one of his designs in the laundry when he was in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He told the guards he could sew and iron so he went to work in a separate building during the day with extra food in order to mend SS officers' uniforms.

After Temin's father died in 1983, she was given his family photo album and discovered a letter that he had written searching for Temins around the world as he was the only surviving family member. Now, this poignant text appears as a transcript scrolling down a round 1960s television as part of *Indoor Monument: A Monument to the Home, (In the Rumpus Room)* (1995). Temin's recurrent focus on psychological spaces – private and collective memories and monuments – is explored in her survey.

Remembering is embedded in Temin's practice whether encasing fake fur, wax and clay inside boxes reminiscent of museum cabinets or bird houses: containers as repositories of display items as in *Home Dis-play* (1994) and *Cream Dis-play* (1995). Other sculptures recall a doll's house, *My House* (2005), a rumpus room, fireplace or sideboard as in *Mantle Garden* (2007) and *Sideboard Garden* (2007) where a 1970s aesthetic collides with the stuff of childhood memories. Her interest in design and configuration of interior spaces conjures memories of different eras and the tawdriness of people's private habitation. Moreover, Temin has consistently deployed materials from haberdashery stores (where she has worked) such as synthetic fur, cotton, cord, wax, clay, felt, wood, wallpaper and polystyrene. We are reminded of childhood craft activities – fuzzy felt, pompom making and clay figurines – gone awry.

Temin has been the recipient of several prestigious awards including The Australia Council PS1 studio residency in New York, 1997-8; Samstag Scholarship for Goldsmiths College, London, 1996; and Moët & Chandon Australian Art Fellowship, Epernay, 1999-2000. Not surprisingly, recreating secure environments has been an ongoing preoccupation for this itinerant artist. Some depictions of home life, however, are grim: *Troubled Times* (1997-8) portrays a faceless couple in bed holding the slogans 'I'm a great fuck but a liar' and 'I'm shit in bed but good at tennis' rendered in cutout felt. For Temin: 'My attachment to objects from the '70s coincides with an awareness of my family's dynamic that parallels the object's history.'

The earliest work in this exhibition is the oval-shaped *Gloriette* (1989). Fashioned out of fuzzy felt in Wedgwood's distinctive blue-and-white palette, *Gloriette* is a reclining cow with flowers hanging out of her mouth, perched alongside a contorted tree and surrounded by a decorative wreath: 'At the time, I was looking at the voyeurism of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, and the image of my mother outside the *Gloriette* cake shop in London looked like an image from this series.' Images of animals recur throughout Temin's opus perhaps as human substitutes that are at once cute, vulnerable and nostalgic. These

animals (cow, cat, koala, bumblebee, duck, bird) are repositories of human emotions. Temin's depiction of animals can be traced to her exhibition of terracotta animal sculptures at Melbourne's artist-run space Store 5 followed by a curated exhibition, *10 Animals*, with David Rosetzky and Claire Hart.

Gloriette was first exhibited at Prahran College where Temin was a student under Howard Arkley, Stieg Persson and Victor Majzner:

The predominant style was expressionist gestalt painting. I was aware at art school of the conspicuous absence of women. With a group of both female and male students, we wanted to redress this imbalance and went to Student Union for funding for lunchtime talks. When we graduated, these talks continued at Linden Gallery as a forum series that Kate Daw and I organised on different subjects. Speakers included Anne Marsh, Juliana Engberg, Jenny Watson, Howard Arkley, Kirsten Thompson, Rose Nolan, Robert Owen, Elizabeth Newman and Brenda Ludeman.

S.W.I.M. (Support Women Image Makers) was founded at the same time that the formative artist-run space, Store 5, was established by Gary Wilson, Melinda Harper and Kerrie Poliness across the road from Prahran Tech.

In 1990, on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, the Day of Atonement, Temin exhibited *Repenting For My Sins* at Store 5 – an artist-run space housed in a tiny room in Prahran:

The title refers to the day the show coincidentally fell on and also incorporates the idea that I have to repent for reworking four male abstract painters by remaking their paintings into synthetic fur and placing them together as one work.

Replicating abstract paintings by Victor Vasarely, Kasimir Malevich, Frank Stella and Piet Mondrian in fur on masonite, this suite of four appropriations was included in my first curated exhibition, *The Subversive Stitch*, at Monash University Gallery in 1991, and I have continued to work with Temin on a number of projects.

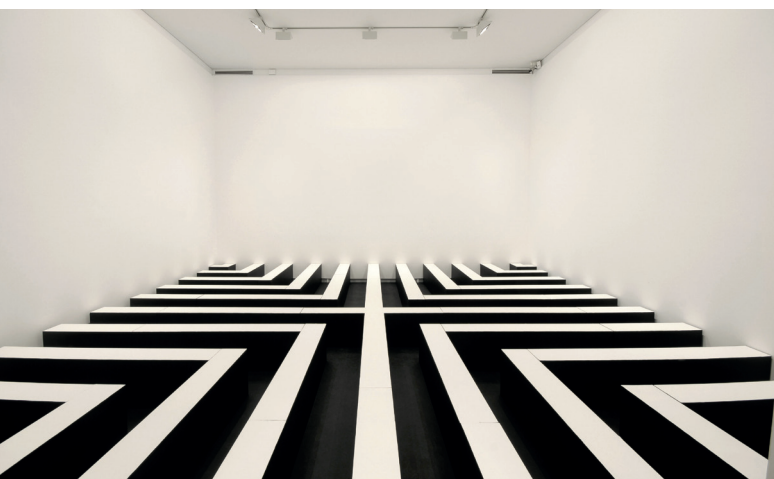
Temin reinterprets hard-edged, male abstraction into a sentimental material. Three years later, a bedraggled bumblebee appeared in a studio exhibition that I curated at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces as part of the Jewish Festival of the Arts. Propped in the corner, *Black and Yellow Corner Problem* (1992) lies prone and susceptible on the gallery floor. It is soft, pliable, droopy, unkempt and cuddly. Temin's sad transitional objects might be from a lost, childhood world of comforting, furry friends.

Temin continued to rework hallmarks of modernism such as Frank Stella's *Arbeit macht frei* (1958) as an immersive, geometrical floor maze originally exhibited at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 1995 when it was housed in Melbourne's Botanical Gardens: 'The reworking of Stella's *Arbeit macht frei* was about wanting to understand the gaps between the title and the image, the disconnection between the two. My engagement with abstraction and memory began with the questions Stella raised for me.' Temin's black-and-white timber maze is navigated by audiences. The unnerving German motto, *Arbeit macht frei*, which translates as 'Work Sets You Free', appeared on the gates of concentration camps including Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, emphasising the disjunction between the



visuality of the work and its loaded title.

During 1992, as artist-in-residence at the School of Art and Design at Monash University, Temin started working in glass with access to Monash's glass studio. The glossy, glass pictures from the *Iconic Moments* series made during 1994 include portraits of Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Kate Moss, Kylie Minogue and Nigella Lawson depicted in black-and-white in relief. Sourcing images from mass media and art history, Temin's shiny surface is both fragile and fetishistic. Robert Mapplethorpe's portrait of Louise Bourgeois holding a giant phallus is rendered in glass with two works by Eva Hesse in the background. Here, Temin conflates Hesse with Bourgeois, fusing formal and emotional intensity with visceral and erotic associations. Temin's survey unravels the intersection of histories – art, Jewish and personal – in an accretion of wit, vulnerability and dexterity.



Notes

1. The March of the Living is an annual, international program that brings people from all over the world to Poland on Holocaust Memorial Day, to march from Auschwitz to Birkenau, the largest concentration camp complex built during WWII, and then to Israel to observe Israel Memorial Day.

Kathy Temin, curated by Jason Smith and Sue Cramer, is showing at Heide Museum of Modern Art, 1 August to 8 November 2009. *Kathy Temin: My Monument, Black Cube* is showing at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, 3 September to 3 October 2009.

Natalie King is a curator, writer and broadcaster based in Melbourne. She is a correspondent for Flash Art and ARTiT (Japan).

All quotes by Kathy Temin are from studio conversations with the author, June 2009.

PAGE 9: *My House*, 2005, mixed media and DVD; 3 parts: 163 x 170 x 130cm; (house) 250 x 120 x 120cm; (trees) 210 x 120 x 120cm. Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art for New 05. Installation view, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne 2009. PAGE 10: *My Monument: White Forest* (detail), 2008, synthetic fur and filling, steel, wood, composition board, dimensions variable. Installation view, Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2009. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / The Queensland Government's Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane Acquisition Fund Collection, purchased 2009. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *My Monument: Black Cube*, 2009, synthetic fur and filling, wood, steel, overall dimensions: 355 x 370 x 370cm. Installation view, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne. Image courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne; *Gloriette*, 1989, wood, synthetic fur, felt and enamel paint on wood, 56.5 x 78 x 3cm; *Indoor Monument: Hard Dis-play*, 1995-2009, wood and paint, height 37cm, installation dimensions variable: at Heide 600 x 600cm. Installation view, Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2009; *Repenting For My Sins*, 1990, synthetic fur, wood filling on composition board; 4 parts: 147 x 113cm; 78 x 49cm; 125 x 122cm; 88 x 80cm. Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia State Art Collection, purchased 1992. All images this article of work by Kathy Temin. Unless otherwise indicated, all images courtesy the artist, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne and Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne.