

Yolunda Hickman in conversation with Hope Wilson

Tuesday 25 August, 2020

Hope Wilson: Thank you for making time to talk with me today, Yolunda! We've had a slightly different installation experience this week—it's been very FaceTime oriented—but it's lovely to have the chance to discuss your exhibition in more detail. I thought we could start with the title—*Shoaling*—I'm interested to hear where it came from and why you chose it?

Yolunda Hickman: Thanks for having me! Installing via FaceTime has definitely been different than usual, but I think we made a great team and it went very smoothly.

When coming up with the exhibition title, I was thinking through a long-held interest in collective nouns; thinking about how they name or hold together a group of animals or a group of things, like a herd of sheep or a flock of birds. The works in the exhibition have smaller constituent parts which add up to make a larger whole, so they work in a similar way to a collective noun. 'Shoaling' is one of the collective nouns to describe how fish

congregate or group together in a cluster, but you hear the word 'schooling' more often. A school is where the fish are all swimming in the same direction at the same speed and they are usually trying to run away from or confuse prey. A shoaling is a looser cluster. It's when fish are grouped socially or they're feeding. I was interested in the idea that there were these different collective nouns to describe groupings of the same animal, but they implied different movements and arrangements or different paces. So the exhibition title *Shoaling* came from there and I was also interested in how it's almost the opposite of the work title *Clearings*. 'Clearings' are a gap in a forest or an open area between trees, whereas a 'shoal' is something that is filled; a cluster moving.

HW: You've really piqued my interest with the mention of collective nouns! When I first read the title I had that association with fish behaviour but when I Googled it, it also had something to do with the physics of waves...

Shoaling

Yolunda Hickman

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YH: Yeah, I did the same thing—I went straight to fish when I was thinking about it and when I Googled 'shoaling' to make sure that I was getting it right, I saw the wave thing. I found the wave shoaling really interesting, too, because it connected to pictorial depth, which is a big part of the work for me. Wave shoaling is—and I'm not going to get this perfect because I'm not a physicist—when the height of a wave changes as it comes in closer to shore and the seabed is shallower. This also changes the frequency of the wave and pacing of the waves. I thought that was such an interesting happenstance in relation to my interest in the optical pictorial space and messing with pictorial depth. The images in the exhibition are often quite flat as parts but form complex optical spaces.

HW: So there's an interplay between the two definitions!

YH: Yeah, just a happy coincidence more than anything planned!

HW: In the exhibition spaces at Blue Oyster there are two series and there are two gallery spaces. The works in the front gallery space of Blue Oyster, the *Clearings* series, test the macro and micro possibilities of the image by asking the viewer to move around the gallery space to absorb different viewpoints. How do you imagine these different experiences of the work, the micro and macro, playing out for the viewer? Particularly in the front gallery space with those large visual fields.

YH: I guess the way they are installed makes them quite overwhelming or quite intense. There is a lot of visual information and it's very full so there's an immediate presence, an immediate bombardment of image, picture and visual noise. That overwhelmingness is interesting to me in relation to the proliferation of images in culture generally, for example, walking down the street there are ads and a lot of visual noise that fills our lives that we just don't really pay attention to. We get so used to it in a cityscape, anyway. I'm really interested in that nature of image, what images do on that larger level but then on the micro level. The play between the image as a whole and the smaller parts (like fish in a shoal) are constituent elements which go together. This creates image disruptions on a smaller scale and a larger scale.

HW: I imagine the transition between the front gallery space, which is so tightly packed, and the back gallery space, which is quite sparsely populated, will be interesting, too. How do you see that transition for the viewer?

YH: That was quite purposeful, I wanted there to be those two different energies in the pace of viewing. The back gallery would be almost a break, or a breath—a space to look closer or slower without that visual noise being so overwhelming. It might almost be a relief once you get in there and could allow space to think about *Clearings*, to carry those ideas forward but in a more contained way.

HW: There is a testing of how people interact with the work alongside those ongoing experiments with the visual field and what's happening on the stretcher.

YH: Even just the scale of the works. *Flotsam* in the back space are quite small and they are quite contained. They are also playing with the image in a different way, more of a physical way and then *Clearings* which is such a flat surface—still built up materially but the image appears more like a screen—there isn't a lot of depth there. In *Flotsam*, I guess you could call them a cross between images and objects. There is a different way of thinking about

how images can take on a physical form.

HW: This morning I showed your work to my parents and my Mom was looking at the quilt fabrics that have been used in *Clearings* and she said, "Oh, I recognise them!" There was a real affinity she felt with those fabrics. I'm interested in hearing about the images you have chosen for both *Clearings* and *Flotsam*. They have their own strong associations—quilting fabric, op-shopped objects—how do these associations contribute to or change the work for you?

YH: Yeah, the quilting fabrics I'm interested in...these images have really strong associations with different subcultures and groups of people who are really into their 'things,' like quilting and op-shop knick-knacks. And the *Flotsam* works use hydrographic dipping (which is how the image gets onto the surface) which also has a subculture attached to it, largely to do with automotive and firearms industries, quite a masculine Westie culture. I think the one thing I'm interested in with all of those images, they could all be considered kitsch or decorative or banal. They are things that aren't—I hate the term—'high culture,' they are images which are more everyday or ordinary. They become an image as a typology, that you might not look at twice—we just take them for granted. In the quilting fabrics,

it's not a specific horse but just a generic horse, or the general idea of a horse. These images are so banal in some ways we don't even really think about them—or they become attached to the subculture around that image representation. Even just from a material point of view, I was trying to think of images that are mass produced for application, that aren't necessarily about the media—images which might populate life in a quite ordinary way, in a domestic way.

HW: That's an interesting distinction between media imagery or advertising imagery and the kinds of images we spend time with in our everyday lives, the ones that occupy or populate our homes.

YH: Exactly, I think these types of images also have a nostalgia attached to them, they're the kind of image that might be in an op-shop painting. They're a little bit romantic, a little bit idealised or may even have nostalgic childhood associations. They are generalised and familiar images that we use to stand in for ideas, that you might use to teach children or decorate a space. The kind of thing you might find on a biscuit tin from your grandparents at Christmas.

HW: I also think, in terms of communication, there is a generosity in those images.

The thought that someone who might not have experience with contemporary art could come into Blue Oyster and feel there is an access point into the work and that access point would be through their relationship with those images.

YH: Yeah, it is quite interesting. I showed the work to my niece recently and when she saw *Clearings*, she said, "Oh, it's a horse-fish". She instantly got these ideas that I had developed driven by semiotic theory, and she immediately saw a 'horse-fish.' And that's exactly what I talk about them as—it's not one image, it's both. It is a horse-shaped edge that's filled with fish or a fish-shaped edge filled with horses—it is both images competing with one another. She was making up these funny compound words for these double-image animals and saying "It's a 'Hish'" or "It's a 'Forse'", and you know it is—because it's both of these things at once.

HW: That's great! You mentioned earlier about the hydrographic dipping images, the wrapping... I'm curious to hear a little about the practical processes behind creating these works—how do you build these compositions?

YH: *Flotsam* uses a process called hydrographic dipping which, as I mentioned, is mostly used for cars and firearms. You might want to camouflage your gun scope

if you're a hunter, or you might want a hubcap which looks like it's made of carbon fibre, but isn't made of carbon fibre. So these image films wrap around the objects. I made these works by collecting found objects from op-shops and then sunk them into wet plaster to hold them together in a composition. Again, like the quilting fabrics, I was looking in op-shops for familiar, kitsch or mundane types of forms—so there are a lot of animals or trees, fruit, cars, things that are quite ordinary. I was interested in different scales, too. There might be a really small whale toy and a large rabbit ornament sitting side by side—these images don't work together in our expectations of images.

And then the hydrographic dipping conforms an image film to the substrate that I've made out of the opshop objects and plaster. I was interested in the way the images of the forms underneath would disrupt the image that is laid across the top or the other way around. So the images may become unreadable because they are competing with each other. They might be jostling, trying to be noticed but they aren't because there is so much visual noise clashing together.

And then *Clearings* are made with quilting fabrics with an iron-on heat transfer backing. I then laser cut shapes out of more

fabrics using the same motifs. I work almost like a jigsaw, piecing together and ironing them into compositions. Again, using quite mundane or industrial processes.

HW: You referred to Jacques Rancière's idea of the "incompatible" image in the exhibition text and discussed the way that "high semiotic traffic" can complicate and collapse our understanding of image, meaning and content. I know these are ideas you've been testing in a number of different formats and mediums throughout your career—how does *Shoaling* take this in a new direction?

YH: Going back to part of our earlier conversation, *Shoaling* is testing images on a scale that I haven't really done before, I've often worked on smaller paintings. I'm always interested in the idea of series and modularity, but this is filling a whole room and working with quite large individual panels, so that was new for me with *Clearings*. And then with *Flotsam*, it's thinking about images in a dimensional way and thinking through putting these things next to each other as objects and images. So, thinking through the idea of incompatibility—Rancière talks about incompatibility as a way to disrupt conventions or systems of montage and a sequence of

images. He frames it in terms of moving images specifically, but I think incompatibility can exist in painting or still images too. By having images next to each other that shouldn't be next to each other, images that disrupt or cancel one another out, I can make a viewer think about how meaning is constructed through images and the systems underlying the construction of meaning. When you notice that incompatibility, you realise there is an expectation of what that 'right' might be, or what the convention might be.

HW: Of course, that makes sense. I wanted to finish by touching on something neither of us have had control over this year and that's the context we have been working within as we developed this exhibition. I don't want to dwell on this too much but I wondered if you would briefly discuss some of the challenges involved—*Shoaling* was initially planned to open in May and that date was pushed out due to Covid-19. Now we're opening the exhibition in August and facing similar complications with you not being able to join us for the opening. How have these postponements and closures impacted *Shoaling* and your work?

YH: It has been quite a challenge and it's not the same show that I thought it would be. That's

not a bad thing, there are other opportunities that come up when you're thinking through and navigating limitations and challenges. Aside from me not being in Dunedin to install the works in a practical sense, there were other changes to the installation plan for the back space. I couldn't get into my studio because of the lockdown at the moment. With the changing schedule and timelines, there were also other works that I wanted to develop as another possibility, but I just haven't had access to fabricators in time to test those works properly. I've also had to reshuffle my plans for the year, so I suddenly have a few shows coming together at a fixed point in the middle of the year instead of being spaced out. There's this quite compressed moment for me and the works overlapping between those shows in a way I hadn't planned. It is what it is, like everyone else, you do what you can, but I do think it is important to find opportunities in those limitations. I'm still excited for the show and have enjoyed seeing the two gallery spaces play against each other.

HW: I know there have been a lot of challenges in navigating those different shows and that things might not have come together in the way you thought that they would. I think there are a lot of

people who have had a similar compression of their year into the last few months of 2020. I'm so excited to see the exhibition finally and it's wonderful to see the work in Ōtepoti, so, thank you!

YH: The physical gallery space at Blue Oyster is ideal because you have to walk through the front space to get to the back space and it's quite long and there are these different vantage points from the street through the window, from the front door and then back across the gallery. I'm quite excited to see how that plays out in terms of physical space. I'm really crossing my fingers and hoping I can come down soon!



Image: Yolunda Hickman, *Clearings* (installation view), 2020, Cotton appliqué, 1500 x 1000mm each, in *Shoaling*.
Photo: Jonas Jessen Hansen.



Image: Yolunda Hickman, *Flotsam* (installation view), 2020, found objects, resin plaster, gesso, wood, poly-vinyl alcohol film and clearcoat, 185 x 185mm each in *Shoaling*.
Photo: Jonas Jessen Hansen.