

UK



SEAN EDWARDS Limoncello, London

One of the effects of geometrical form and modular structure is to obscure an object's past and occlude narrative. The familiar geometry of a brick – or the serial patterning of a wall – conceals its individuality. Minimalism exploited this effect as an antidote to the expressive profligacy of modernist art. Sean Edwards's shelf installations are an anti-minimalism, returning anecdote to form. They are functional shelving as well as modular sculpture, depending on whether your focus is the units themselves or the found and made objects loosely distributed on their surfaces. The artist calls these 'practice objects', a term that pivots nicely between the 'c' the first word does have and the 's' that it might have had, galvanizing the phrase into narrative. The objects are whimsically slight, as though pleading a little too theatrically to be overlooked. Edwards has an expanding archive of them. They reappear, accumulating associations with each exhibition context. As Phyllida Barlow, who taught Edwards, recycles the timber from which her installations are constructed, Edwards carries his bubble-wrapped store of odds and ends from site to site. This is a history – an art history, if you like – superimposed those that the found objects already possess.

On the makeshift MDF shelves that dominated Limoncello was a vintage Tesco carrier bag, neatly folded, which I last saw on the plywood shelf/sculpture that divided Kunstverein Freiburg when Edwards exhibited there in 2012. Pinned to the wall, a sheet of cut-out 'UN's, made from the logo of the British newspaper, *The Sun*, forms a red chequered pattern I recall from an exhibition at Tanya Leighton gallery in Berlin in the same year. By deleting the 'S' and tiling the fragments, Edwards renders a pop-cultural reference formalistic. But this formalism is alive to its changing context; *The Sun* clippings would have been less recognizable in Berlin than in London. Where the work is installed determines how much reference will penetrate the filters the artist applies. The primary filter is that of presenting objects so as to highlight their decorative aspects, making it seem as though they were part of a purely aesthetic programme. A reel of rust-coloured thread dangles from a turquoise spool, the contrasting colours distracting us from a thought as to where the rest of the thread might now be; sewn into clothes, for instance. Edwards uses

colour, like geometry, as a mask or shell to circumvent reference. Colour is asked to conceal rather than evoke history.

Edwards is a thoroughgoing postmodernist in the way he neutralizes emotion – for example, nostalgic retrospection – by converting it into signs. His installations generate the past they feed on as well as being metaphors for that self-mythologizing process. The 'practice objects' can be taken as relics or souvenirs, invoking both a personal past (Edwards's) and the fictional history his art leaves behind. This exhibition had the same title as his previous one at Limoncello – in their former space, in 2011 – and its MDF structure corresponded to the dimensions of that somewhat smaller L-shaped gallery. The matrix of shelving casts the past in the form of a cage. By giving sculptural form to his own retrospection, Edwards implicates the viewers in it. He delegates his predicament, confers onto us the role of a decipherer of traces of a lost past which is largely his own.

Childhood is traditionally memory's *punctum*, and the installation includes three versions of a tiny model of a house – a wooden geometric form, like a three-dimensional mock-up of a child's drawing – placed on one of the shelves. Its image is enlarged into a poster and a framed colour photograph. The triangulation resembles a didactic, Kosuthian relativising of object and representation, but the image remains a conflicted sign defying such rationalisation. Its reduction to a geometrical cipher mutes its signification, while its resemblance to a child's sketch invokes the past its abstracted form is renouncing.

The modular shelves on which the house is placed are just as ambivalent in their function: they are rulers measuring our progress through space and time, even as the lateral dynamic they suggest is countered by the details they draw us into contemplating. Among a sequence of semi-abstract studio transparencies, hung as film in a contact sheet, there are pictures of the sea and a mother and child, like windows among a series of drawn blinds, reel time defaulting to real time.

MARK PRINCE



UK

MELANIE SMITH MK Gallery, Milton Keynes

The alliterative rhythm of the idea – Melanie Smith from Mexico City in Milton Keynes; it could almost be a line from Dr. Seuss – feels apt for an artist with such an impish sensibility. Born in England in 1965, Melanie Smith moved to Mexico in 1989 after training as a painter at the University of Reading. In the early 1990s she turned her flat into Mel's Café, a weekend 'pop-up kitchen' where artists including Francis Alys and Gabriel Orozco would play cards and exhibit work. Smith has since become a cornerstone of the artistic community in Mexico and represented the country at the 2011 Venice Biennale, making her first UK survey exhibition, at MK Gallery, a welcome, if overdue, homecoming.

The opening gallery established a parallel between two seemingly disparate places: *Spiral City* (2002), a five-minute aerial portrait of Mexico City's sprawling urban grid (a response to Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970), was projected on a vast scale opposite *Six Paintings of Urban Views* (2006), a series of modest canvases on which similar scenes are abstracted beneath a milky film of acrylic paint. The wash of greys within the gallery was offset by pools of verdant light from tinted windows in the foyer and corridors. This encouraged the mind to leap from Mexico's capital – a concrete jungle at the heart of a subtropical country – to Milton Keynes – a suburban grid designed to incorporate green space and lush planting, according to the Garden City ideals that inspired the so-called New Towns of post-war Britain.

This play with colour developed in the adjoining Cube Gallery where the two most substantial works in the exhibition were screened in rotation. As ever with Smith, much was expressed at first through form: the darkened room contained a horizontal screen at right-angles with a vertical one;