

# invisiblevisible (with Emily Cormack)

OK, the document you sent to me had seven lines in it. And about twenty-six words. Is that enough? As I said it was just a start. Is this part of our writing together? The initial bickering? Anyway, it seems when talking about works like these, you and I want to talk about them as props that hold the story, the frameworks of an idea.

[Assertion] The content seems not really that important.

[Discension] I'm not so sure I agree, are you suggesting that structure can never also be content?

[Clarification] You know I am a big believer in form following function. Form paralleling content. It's just when the two get out of balance and I am suspicious. Perhaps now, the great framework, the *language* of sculpture has become enough. Like substitutes or summaries for research and feeling.

[Give me some examples] Powder-coated steel frames with small incidental-seeming objects flung casually here and there. Screen-like props, anthropomorphically scaled, and draped with fabric that flutters, leather chain, plastic chain, a designer chair here and a banana there.

[Assertion] It's kind of frustrating to feel like you are seeing the same work over and over again, but maybe it is also training to look harder, to acknowledge the intricacies of the visual language that is being developed. [Question] What do you think about that?

[Answer] It makes me feel like I am driving down a cul de sac in a new housing estate trying to differentiate the different styles of Delfin homes on offer. *Wow, check it out this one's got eaves!!!*

[Opinion] But you can hardly blame the sculptor. Just like the Delfin homes. They build them because people love them. Need them. Want rooms similar to their neighbours' because everyone's got the same stuff to put in them anyway, with just enough space or shelving for some kind of individual *flair*.

But then, perhaps, this is what they're about. A kind of self-reflexive critique of ourselves and the land of structures and frameworks, with very little flow through, that we dwell in. The world of form being well over content. [Assertion] Maybe we are all talking about the same thing?

Here I think this is about your desire/our desire (compulsion/mental illness) to find narrative but of course this is about the sculptural, the essential, the stripped back.[Interruption/over-talking even] sculpture isn't always about the *essential* do you think? But that's off topic ...

[Response to over-talking] I half agree. But when it becomes about the elements of the work—the 'base' materials—isn't that essential?

[Sneeze] Maybe this is about the non-verbal. I know you are going to say art *is* about the non-verbal (of course!).

[Assertion] But maybe this work takes us back to a tangible/literal association with this. And these works create their own network, which looks like a big ol' net. Cross-pollinating one another with content.

[Ascension] You mean like these sculptural frameworks are the hand gestures or leg crosses of the sculptural nomenclature (that's not a question).

[Concession] Interesting idea.

[You always say 'interesting', when other people might say 'great'—you don't mean 'interesting', you're fobbing me off.]





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# Kate Smith's empire

Sutton is one of the few galleries in Melbourne still willing to underwhelm.

The space was so sparse, I didn't have a clue until I was up close to the six or seven works on canvas board propped vaguely around the walls. What were canvas boards ever supposed to be about: amateur utopia, the art proletariat, easy travel (always better stacked)? Of course now though they're about the contemporary precedents.

Modern painting is one of the few sports in the art scene that can modulate a negative, or speak of decline, provoking value judgements about production and posing questions like: do we need it in the first place? Good questions for 2012. And slacker abjection for Kate Smith also clears the path of all that masculine indebtedness.

Maybe early on all you can do as an artist is get the main propositions in place. It's enough to do that.

What's on the painted surface matters less. A friend said 'palette paintings'—anything so long as the results are sufficiently empty to represent not much at all, or at least come across as incidental. Although these works manage still to be laced with the after-effects of that new 'empire of painting' at the ANU Canberra.

Having a show in a senior gallery can be more important in an artist's career than the show itself. This is something the artists Kate Smith unavoidably recalls—Imants Tillers, John Nixon, Store 5 et. al.—most likely also understood very early on. It gratifies the gallery but is understood in an entirely different way compared to where a show as scant and minimal is held in an artist's space or less secure gallery.

Kate Smith, [Deep privacy/convex](#), Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, 12 October - 10 November 2012.



Kate Smith



Kate Smith



Kate Smith, 'Mechanic holds to reams of white paper', 2012, oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 20.3 x 40.6 cm



Kate Smith, 'Orange reserve', 2011-12, oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas board, 20.3 x 40.6 cm



Kate Smith, 'No meaning tattoo', 2012, oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 25.4 x 20.3 cm

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# Lars and the real world

Have we all heard the story about drowning being a good way to go? It goes like this: once the body gives over, a euphoric wave washes through it, a sense of calm to belie the raw fact of death. I imagine at this moment what you see is not that whole 'my life flashed before my eyes' kind of thing—a sequence of poignant images carefully sequenced to sum up a life lived well, or wasted, or lived indifferently or whatever—but rather something more like shapes and colours; a synthesis of everything. And then things simply drop out. What got me thinking about this was a story on Yahoo! 7 News recently. A man died for a period of time and was resuscitated. On his return, he revealed he had been to heaven and there were no surprises. In fact it was just as one might reasonably expect: pink clouds, gates, angels with wings.

How do you make something that means something? Something that moves beyond itself to become more than the sum of its parts, something truly transcendent? I read recently that an artist's body of work projects them beyond their own lifetime. But in doing this each single work remains linked to both its moment of inception, and to the sequence of historical moments that underlie it. Alfred Gell referred to this as 'distributed personhood'. He was trying to make sense of the quality embodied by a group or series of objects which, seen collectively, act as a bodily presence across space and time. Bring together a group of works and you reconstitute part of that body. You bring together an identity, however briefly or partially, and that identity speaks to whomever is around to listen. No wonder artists get nervous before a show. To make art is to enter an ongoing historical act in which your objects enter a lineage of other similar-yet-different objects—your own, other people's—a lineage of marks and materials, an accrual of historical moments; an infinite weight of 'then' upon 'now'. For any artist at any point in history this weight must at times seem unbearable. It must prompt the question: how might I make something outside history? There's probably not an answer to this.

You might look around the art world at any given time and wonder why artists sometimes seem to be attempting to collectively recreate the ideals of a particular

past moment. This is of course more than history repeating, more than simple nostalgia. Indirectly or not, this kind of translation can only highlight the unavoidable space between then and now. This is how the historical moment becomes recursive, how it reconfigures itself, how 'innovation' becomes contingent on 'tradition'. Regardless of apparent similarities, things in translation always shift and change. Maybe it's about returning to a juncture in time to imagine other possible futures; trying to picture something that could or should have been if things had turned out a little differently. In this way 'looking back' to move a creative project forward might be a form of hope.

Trevelyan Clay (upcoming), [Neon Parc](#), Melbourne, 28 November - 22 December, 2012.



Trevelyan Clay, works in progress, 2012



Trevelyan Clay, works in progress, 2012



Trevelyan Clay, works in progress,  
2012



Trevelyan Clay, 2012



Trevelyan Clay, works in progress,  
2012

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## Mann in Japan

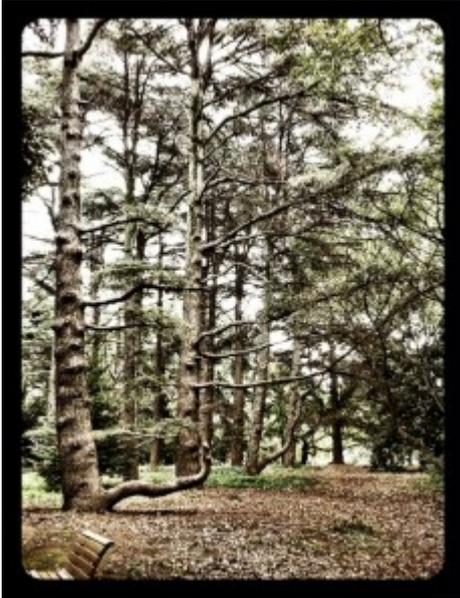
I'm not sure where that itch of devotion comes from, the one that gets a person up early in the morning to fold their bed sheets carefully before having a cold shower in preparation for a job as personal as that of a singer-songwriter. Melbourne's blessed, in a world where popular music has turned bland and good-looking, to still produce such unique musical talents such as KES, Jonathan Michel and Oliver Mann. Artists who take the listener on an intimate trip to the furthest corners of the human soul and experience.

Oliver Mann's flare for storytelling through song is enriched by his opera training, giving him a huge spectrum of delicate and penetrating vocal tools to enter a listener's heart. 'Shoes of leather', a regular on Olly's set list, details the story of a drug trafficker's effort to reach Hong Kong by foot after his plane crashes in the jungle. It's quite a story that reaches heights when Olly belts out the chorus 'Hong Kong forever, onward walk', summoning an almighty tone that vibrates and almost crumbles me when I hear it. I've cried and laughed many times listening to Olly meander through intimate performances at local churches, ballrooms and his Sunday residency at the Edinburgh Castle in Brunswick.

I was keen to hear about Oliver's recent tour of Japan, and asked him to share some words and pictures from his wonderful journey.



1. I got to Ikebukuro in Tokyo to prepare for my first week of touring some new music I had written. The thing about Japan is it's tough to find somewhere to practise music because the living confines are often tight and too much noise can be upsetting for neighbours, so I was forced outdoors into the megalopolis but found this tiny park in Ikebukuro amidst the streets and streets of concrete. I had to practise walking around in circles to disrupt the preying mosquitos! It was a special park—Tokyo is full of such diamonds in the rough.



2, 3. The gardens in Shinjuku, a morning stroll ... After a six-show tour through Japan I lived in Shinjuku for a month preparing and performing the Donizetti opera *Don Pasquale* in a joint production with Opera Australia and the Arts Foundation, Tokyo. This was a busy rehearsal period followed by two shows in the Shinjuku Bunka Center, so it was pretty heads down. I took any chance I could to walk through the park next door to the hotel—Shinjuku Gyoen-mae park ... and if I got lost in the surrounding megalopolis I could look up to orient myself with the Cocoon Tower.



4. My partner Peet made me some tour shirts ... so I looked stylish when I played.



5. This was my dusk walk along the Kamo River, Kyoto, from where I was staying for my show that evening. Shows are always quite early, three- or four-band bills starting around 7 pm and over before 10 pm.



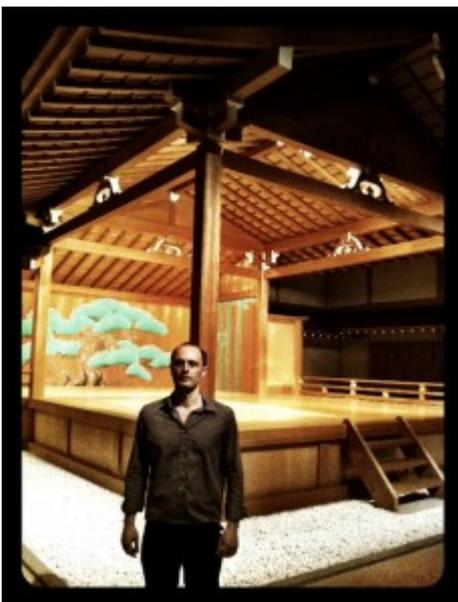
6. Guggenheim House in Shioya, Kobe

A grand old house with musical performances in the living room. Owned by an experimental musician named Ali Morimoto who was very kind and

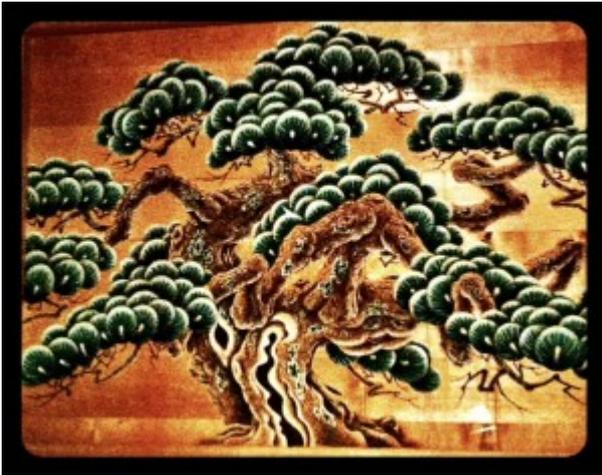
accommodating. I played here with Eddie Marcon's band and a wonderful pianist, Takeo Toyama.



7. This is Eddie sitting at the piano with the band in the living room at Guggenheim House, just after the show.



8. I listened to a lot of traditional Japanese music while over there. Here is a photo of me in front of the very intricate Noh stage in Tokyo—the National Theatre. At the back of all Noh and Kyogen stages there is a painting of a *matsu*—an aged pine tree. Ancient spirits can make their way down to earth where there is an aged pine tree. Good vibes.



9. This is the most beautiful painted *matsu* I found, in Shimokitazawa, Tokyo. A massive and striking painting.



10. After the shows were over Peet and I went for a ride. This is Peet riding across a Chinkabashi, which is a specially designed bridge intended to sink peacefully and steadfastly in the event of flood (hence, no railing). The Shimanto River in Shikoku is one of the last clear water rivers in Japan and was stunning to ride along, though our ride was cut short by the onset of a typhoon.

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# Elizabeth Newman: The origin of life

In a country in which the dominant culture has a limited pre-history in terms of art and artefacts, one strategy is to recreate these models for ourselves. The culture of the 'second degree', as Paul Taylor put it, hangs on this persistent return to the centre or source of creative endeavour as always elsewhere or in a virtual space. Hence, the ground zero of the monochrome, visited again and again and again by so many Australian artists.

The life of forms is clearly not reducible to the more critical agendas of the 1980s. Even if you take to heart the end game of art and our post-colonial situation there is always something more desirous in this act of reclaiming or making one's own mark.

This is the compelling moment, in a nutshell, of the art of Elizabeth Newman. In her recent body of work on display in the Monash University Museum of Art, this virtual space of art is made concrete in a variety of abstract propositions.

As pristine cut-out fields of colour—this one in green, that one in red ... —these canvases are like the colour monochromes of Yves Klein's first monochrome statements on paper made palpable as textured floating fields that you touch with the eyes. Or, take these assemblages, incorporating cut-out fabrics like Rauschenberg's veils, anchored and muddied with paint. And this one, stretched over oddly assembled frame armatures to recreate the overall manifestations of painting burst out of the frame in line with those old Greenbergian restrictions.

The elephant in the room is the found object of a piece of old pipe, with attached masonry, bulbous like the Willendorf Venus. As both vessel and void, *The origin of life* (2012) doubles Courbet's most famously explicit painting. Who would have thought that a Melbourne building site could reveal such riches? Art history in the hands of Newman is no sterile masterpiece but one that lives and breathes, stripped of old hierarchies, brought down to size, and created with loving attention to the detail of creation and selective dependencies. In her own way, she has thus brought into being something quietly personal and original.

'The true collector looks for the work that is unfinished' is a series of

commissioned works by Elizabeth Newman, included in [Artists' proof #1](#), Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 4 October - 15 December 2012.



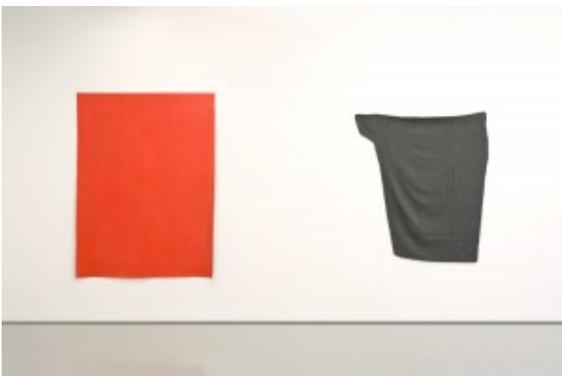
Elizabeth Newman,  
'The true collector  
looks for the work that  
is unfinished', 2012.  
Photo: John Brash



Elizabeth Newman,  
'Untitled', 2012, oil and  
fabric on canvas. Photo:  
John Brash



Elizabeth Newman, 'The origin of life', 2012, found ceramic. Photo: John Brash



Elizabeth Newman, 'The true collector looks for the work that is unfinished', 2012. Photo: John Brash



Elizabeth Newman, 'Untitled', 2012, oil on canvas. Photo: John

## Colleen Ahern—'Cortez the killer'

I recently had the pleasure of a studio visit with Melbourne artist [Colleen Ahern](#). Ahern is a talented painter, best known for her domestic-scale paintings that portray popular musicians of the 1970s and onwards. The works are skilful and filled with love: there is a tender thrum of fandom in their composition and a nostalgia in her chosen palette.

The last time we met, Ahern was working on a series of paintings based on photos she had taken of musicians performing on TV, on shows like *rage* and various music docos. The portraits captured her beloved musicians within the physical frames of the visual media through which we access music culture: a trippy colour burst; a line of static caused by the pausing of a VHS recording; a vague reflection of the viewer on the screen. Each portrait foregrounds a particular technological glitch. The series referenced the platforms through which we engage with our musical heroes and also the distance between us and them; the distance that allows them to remain accessible but untouchable, out of physical reach but close enough to gaze upon and listen to with adoration.

Ahern's latest series began with the Neil Young song, 'Cortez the killer', which appears on the 1975 album *Zuma*. The song tells the story of Hernan Cortez, a conquistador who conquered Mexico for Spain in the sixteenth century. The song got Ahern thinking about what Cortez might look like and she began working on a number of paintings and drawings that depict her vision of the conquistador and elements of his escapades. These works continue Ahern's desire to connect with musicians and make concrete and tangible her particular personal relationship to the music itself.

Where these new works get particularly interesting, and I think elusive in their purpose for Ahern herself, is that they have been the motivation for an extended series of drawings and paintings that depict numerous men, like Cortez, whom Ahern has never actually seen. These portraits are generated from Ahern's

imagination—they are not based on source images or narratives that she has created around them. The portraits themselves are as clearly depicted as if sketched from life and are motivated by her desire to create a series of faces that exercise her skill with various facial features. Each portrait embraces a different style: colonial, post-war Europe, contemporary. Each one is unique.

This series strikes me as particularly ambitious and challenging for a portrait painter. Ahern's only source material exists in the slippery space of the mind and yet she is able to return to it, time and again, over a period of months. The works left me enthused, impressed and excited. But most significantly they left me wondering when was the last time that I could imagine, let alone capture the likeness of someone I had never laid eyes on before.

Ahern's latest series is the stuff of true imagination matched by equal skill. Somehow, for me, it bridges the fandom of her earlier paintings with the anonymous characters of her favourite songs.



Colleen Ahern, 'Feelin' inside', 2010, oil on paper



Colleen Ahern, 'We love you', 2011, oil on paper