



Julie Shiels, *Object 1* - 2013
B + W photographic print, 120 x 100cms
Cover photo: Julie Shiels, *Object 5* - 2013
B + W photographic print, 120 x 100cms
All images courtesy of the artist

Material Affect - Julie Shiels
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julieshiels.com.au



MATERIAL AFFECT Julie Shiels

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The things we keep and the things we throw away tell us about who we are and about the culture we live in. Objects have their own materiality, but they also have meanings attached to them, often described as social value.

Since the beginning of the 20th century artists have had a particular attraction to objects of daily life and to its discards – playing with arrangements or compressions of trash. In the 1960s, artists of the New Realism movement used trash to extend the limits of what could be called art and to criticise consumption. By using trash, and bringing the materiality of objects to the attention of the viewer, these artists wanted to show that art is more than traditional craftsmanship using bronze, paint or stone.

Julie Shiels creates forms from the empty spaces in plastic packages – those familiar leftover spaces that often sit in the corners of our kitchens. While most of us see the packaging as just rubbish, Julie looks back and discovers a mould that can be used to cast objects – objects that open up new possibilities for us to think about materiality and our relationship to everyday things. In that way, she creates “new ways of perceiving the real”¹ and joins the New Realists in showing that objects represent the reality of their time. Despite working with detritus, however, Julie Shiels cannot be defined easily as a New Realist or as an environmentalist.

The artist’s interest in plastic packaging is motivated by the abstracted form she can create using the package as a mould. Ironically, vacuum forming was invented in the 1960s as a cost effective process responding to the demand for packaging for mass-produced goods. It only had one purpose, the presentation of another product.

In this exhibition Julie Shiels presents her own production process, one of abstraction: a simplification, but one that offers a multiplication of points of view and emotions. Is it really an abstraction if the object comes from the same mould? The answer can go either way as a certain familiarity remains within the object. This is a key point in the artist’s practice as the objects and photograms she created are imprints, something of the original object remains while its materiality, shape and function are expanded through the artistic process.

Ideas about the process of ‘series production’ and copying are explored by the artist through casting in different substances and by using light as a material – as the photograms are two-dimensional replicas of the cast objects. The photographic negative was directly marked by light coming through the object. In turn, we are confronted with both the object and its re-presentation as an image.

The photograms evoke X-Rays and surgical instruments, prompting us to think about the human qualities of the images, but traces of the material world evoke the absence



Julie Shiels, *Object 7* - 2013
B + W photographic print, 120 x 100cms

of the original object. Here, manufactured things acquire organic properties that are echoed in the dry-plaster casts disintegrating in the basement exhibition space.

While the photograms poetically extend the metaphor of the plastic package as negatives of functional objects, they transpose the objects into the realm of photographic evidence. As the medium of truth, one of the first uses of photography was to record evidence of crime as characteristics on human faces that were ordered and catalogued as proof of guilt. Photography also enabled portraits of the dead to be created, with the idea that the essence of the person would remain in the photograph. In that way photography has a strong connection to ideas of truth, identity and memory that are explicitly used by the artist to create memorials of our material culture.

Perhaps it is not too big a leap to say that Julie Shiels is the detective in a crime scene, sometimes acting anonymously, to investigate the remains of capital culture, and traces of human presence through the artefacts they have left behind.

Anabelle Lacroix

1. Pierre Restany, Manifesto of Nouveau Réalisme, 1960