

Jacob Whibley: Collaging contemporary nostalgia

By Bill Clarke

For the past six years, Toronto-based Jacob Whibley has produced a body of work that looks as if it could have been made in Europe between the two World Wars. This is not meant as a criticism, but as a comment on his on-going interest in specific aesthetics and art histories, and a fidelity to particular materials. Often working in the difficult, but far too easily maligned, medium of collage, the artist's work to date is rooted in the language of early modernist art, architecture and design. Russian constructivism, the Bauhaus and de Stijl, and the artists affiliated with those movements – Wassily Kandinsky, El Lissitzky, Josef Albers and Piet Mondrian – clearly influence the sophisticated forms that Whibley's work takes; however, his collages and sculptures are much more than simple exercises in homage.

Whibley's garret-like studio in Toronto's West End is filled with storage boxes and filing cabinets containing sheets of paper, scrapbooks and ledgers, dating from the mid-20th Century to as far back as the mid-1800s, that he accumulated over 10 years. It is from this trove that Whibley now constructs his work. "It took me a while to find the courage to start using it," he says. "Every time I begin a collage, I get anxious, feeling that some day the stockpile is going to run out." Despite this, Whibley (who, it should be noted, is a former member of the collective Team Macho) usually works on several collages at once, and does not meticulously map them out in advance. Rather, he affixes the forms and shapes to the surface he is working on – paper, panel or the covers of an old book – immediately. (He does, however, hold on to the off-cuts for future use.) Beginning with what he calls an "imbalanced initial placement", his challenge then is to build a composition that balances visual complexity with cohesiveness. By approaching his constructions intuitively, Whibley allows himself the freedom to make spontaneous decisions, giving works like "further up the line" or "diagram 6 (dk)" (both 2012), with their motifs of arcs and circles, a sense of energy and playful experimentation that would otherwise be lacking.

Another of Whibley's goals is to foreground the histories embedded within the materials he uses. "My materials retain the traces of their experiences and interactions with people and the environment," he explains. "I'm attracted to pre-existing tears, crumples and folds, discolouration from years of storage, and the intentional markings and handwriting." The commonplace nature of the materials he uses imbues the work with a sense of familiarity and timelessness, carrying

within them the centuries of human usage and handling of objects made out of paper. Because of this, Whibley's collages breed an odd sense of nostalgia for the contemporary. Looking at them, those who crave the feel of paper beneath their fingertips may feel a pre-emptive sense of loss about something – paper – that is still very much a part of our world despite the constant predictions of its imminent demise.

Whibley's current body of work includes mixed-media collages, as well as new sculptural works and an audio piece; however, where his previous work concerned the accumulation of visual information, here the artist takes a step back. "I wanted to maintain the idea of a composition, but with simpler gestures," he says. The more minimalist collages were produced using off-cuts and scraps from earlier works. The smaller, confetti-like forms and shapes drift and dance across the works' surfaces, eliding one another tenuously rather than abutting each other assertively. (Whibley describes them as more "Miro-y" than Bauhaus.) In a similar fashion, Whibley has taken a reductive approach to the new sculptures. "The earlier cubes were definitely objects," he says. "I started to think about the absence of objects, and the negative space that exists when the object is removed." In this sense, the three elegantly constructed wooden boxes in the show, with their recessed interiors, suggest that Whibley is exploring some of the tenets of Minimalist art. Viewers are prompted to use their imaginations to fill in the voids contained within the boxes.

Another new direction is suggested by the introduction of an Empire Aristocrat typewriter from the 1950s as a mark-making tool. "The typewriter has introduced, for the first time, an element of pre-planning into the work since there are now certain restrictions I have to work within – the width of paper I can use, the colours of the ink on the ribbon, and the fonts contained on the machine's ball," says Whibley. "I also have to adapt to the 'errors' that old equipment is prone to, like the slippage of the cartridge, which will leave uneven spaces between lines of type." Equally unpredictable was the outcome when Whibley scanned and 'edited' three of his collages using Audacity software, transforming his artworks into sound waves for the exhibition's audio component. "You'd think that the collages with the most visual information would produce the noisiest results," says the artist. "But, I discovered that it was the white space in the collages that generated the most sound." (In a further gesture towards a more minimalist aesthetic and, perhaps, to visually convey the 'white noise' contained on them, Whibley pressed limited edition records of the results on clear vinyl.)

"I felt like I'd achieved everything I wanted to say, working in a certain way, over the last six years," says Whibley, implying that there are other new directions he plans to explore in future work. "I wanted to challenge myself and see if I could achieve the same effects with less." In the case of Whibley's current projects, less, most definitely, is more.

About Bill Clarke

Bill Clarke is a Toronto-based arts writer and editor. He currently contributes regularly to ARTnews, and has also written frequently for Canadian Art, Modern Painters and C magazine. He is also the editor of Magenta, an online visual arts publication produced by The Magenta Foundation.