

MICHAEL MALLETT AND ELLEN MUNRO

The Changing Room, Stirling

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Reviewed by Jenny Brownrigg

Glaswegian ex-teacher John MacLean, appointed British Consul by the Russian Bolsheviks in 1917, stated in 'Lecture Three' of his *Eight Lectures on Marxism*, designed to educate, agitate and organise the workforce in the methods of revolutionary Marxism that, 'We found that the value of a commodity is determined by the labour spent in its production and that labour is measured by labour-time. The shorter the time taken to produce a commodity, the less its value and vice versa.'

This Marxist equation could be applied to Dundee-based Michael Mallett's process of production that was evident in the exhibition 'Some Measured Curiosities'. As an artist, Mallett sits in a room for hundreds of hours systematically crafting his large-scale collages. Cutting up sections of vinyl tape, small glossy triangles are stuck to the edge of a cassette case before being transferred onto the board. The discipline involved in such an enterprise is apparent. Any chance decision may result in the artist taking two weeks to carry out. Slowly, areas of tape form glossy, colourful surface territories, their abstract spaces becoming 'no place' (Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516) utopian landscapes that he populates with figures and wildlife culled from found material. All is a detailed division of labour in Mallett's finished work. On close inspection the large areas of colour break back down into their smallest and most detailed constituent parts. In Mallett's collage *Hats Off To Edwin* (2005), images of men are placed in an army, yet individually their dress marks them out as lone protagonists from different historical periods of conflict. However, their overall threat is conquered by the huge swathe of abstraction that they inhabit. Mallett's small sculptural installation *White Noise* (2005) was the curiosity of his work on show. A rag doll had been tied to a chair with parcel tape, her legs, arms and most of her head wrapped in foil, with only her eyes left uncovered. As a work *White Noise* directly references Marx, with a quote stencilled directly onto the floor, in a square of photocopied industrial landscapes upon which the chair sat. The captive doll was surrounded with parcel tape wrapped books and sprouting potatoes wrapped in tin foil. It is only in later conversation with the artist that the full meaning of the work is unwrapped. The artist sees that the doll is himself in the space, a lone, self-employed artist whose definition of employment could be viewed as a capitalist collaborator.

The movements of Marxism and Art Deco were at their most active between the two world wars, a period of social and economic depression. Edinburgh-based Ellen Munro's piece *Cradle Will Rock* (2005) successfully harnesses the glamorous stylised gesture of Art Deco. In her site-specific work Munro had created an abstract gateway reminiscent of a theatre stage frieze around the utilitarian entrance to the second gallery space. Free-spirited colourful shapes of natural elements such as plumes, clouds and waves abound on the stone grey background. However, on closer examination, the mark making is as judged and controlled as Mallett's manipulation of media.

A further connection between Munro and Mallett is their obvious enjoyment of the task. In Munro's small but perfect work *I Will Not Draw a Thingy* (2005) the title statement has been transferred onto a sheet of graph paper above a carefully rendered shape. The skilled hand of the

artist is again apparent in this exercise but for a reason. The dialectic between statement and object plays on the nature of non-meaning, creating a tension, as the origin of the motif, however well crafted, is intangible.

As a statement, 'I will not draw a thingy' could prove to be a timely one for an artist in the current Scottish cultural climate. With the recent unveiling of the Cultural Commission's report there is an emphasis on the cultural rights and entitlement of the citizen, equity of access to cultural activity, and with this, the responsibilities of the artist and cultural community to deliver. As this conception of a social utopia, of an 'art for all' is digested and pondered upon, interesting times lie ahead for the 'creator' and 'creative individuals.' Whilst there is an understanding that a diversity of visual art must be maintained and that cultural rights should not be prescriptive, all as ever is open to interpretation. Must the majority of art experiences henceforth stem from a value and quality of labour that can be readily seen and understood? Is the 'thingy' in art, a thing of the past? With this remit in mind, this reviewer's commendation is that the value to be awarded to 'Some Measured Curiosities' is that Mallett and Munro give good visual pleasure

Michael Mallett, *White Noise*, (detail), 2005

