

RICHARD BLACKWELL

TRENT WALTER looks at the work of a sculptor whose first attraction was to the Chicago urban landscape and its forest of skyscrapers.

Trained in printmaking at the Australian National University School of Art, Richard Blackwell undertook an exchange with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007. Being resident in the Chicago Loop, the commercial centre and heart of the city, had a profound effect on his emerging practice.

In fact, he can pinpoint it to the night of his twentieth birthday: riding his bicycle in the public spaces beneath the skyscrapers that tower above street level. From the vantage of his saddle, looking up towards the canopy of urban landscape while moving at speed, he gained a wealth of visual stimulus that would eventually find its way into his art.

Perhaps best known for his laminated MDF panels that depict three-dimensional space in a purportedly two-dimensional surface, Blackwell's practice also incorporates video, digital prints, installation and performance. Early works such as *Stella*, *Frank Gehry* and *Serra*, all 2009, seemingly take modernism as a reference point, but for Blackwell it's more about "a spatial experience of being around [the works]" than an academically

positioned reference. He reiterates, "The most significant formal influence is the architecture in Chicago."

In conversation about his interdisciplinary practice, Blackwell displays an eagerness and enthusiasm at the opportunity to discuss his motivations and working methods. He also often repeats a single word: momentum. It is apt, as his output to date can be assessed as a series of circumstances and experiences that have accumulated and developed, or to use his phrase "iterated", into his current studio practice.

Discussing his work, Blackwell states, "I fundamentally see my process as being a disconnected drawing process." The dislocation began on returning to art school from Chicago with the need to make a year's worth of work in a single semester. Employing spent lino torn from the floor of a flooded studio, Blackwell began with the idea of cutting it into faceted shapes that would create pseudo 3D forms. The materials resisted his intention of a slick, graphic mark, so, at the suggestion of visiting researcher Dr Paul Thirkell, Blackwell had a woodblock CNC milled. The use of this mechanical process was a critical development in Blackwell's practice. From his account, it freed him to pursue his concepts







more completely so that he is no longer “held back by the limitation of any material or the seeming limitations that they would have if [I was] to work with them in a really intimate way”.

It has allowed him an engagement with methodologies beyond his print media training. *Stacks* 2009, exhibited as part of the annual *Hatched* exhibition at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, presented works that explored the illusion of the object. One of the stacks, made by scanning a piece of timber that was then screen-printed directly to cardboard, appeared to be constructed from a pile of structural pine. Although when collapsed by human intervention during performance, Blackwell notes: “It starts to unpack the virtual nature of those boxes.” As such, the performance and its documentation become the work, rather than the static sculptural

also includes recent digital prints on anodised aluminium, invites the viewer to inspect the geometry of what Blackwell refers to as “a six-pronged cross shape”. In the infinite space of the virtual world, Blackwell has employed architectural detail, namely balconies, to suggest mammoth scale. Unlike his laminated MDF constructions, one has the opportunity to look behind the object of *Supermolet* as it rotates in space. That is, until you realise that you are in fact looking at a computer screen whose projected volume, like pictorial space, is actually a lie.

Speaking of future projects or developments in his practice, Blackwell feels that there are “endless potential trajectories of where it could go”. His recent MDF works, such as *Flood* 2011, continue to demonstrate an ambition and increasing confidence through their intricate

representation of the object. It also activates the mind to consider the transformation of the object from the physical to the virtual and back again.

This duality is evident across Blackwell’s oeuvre. The video work *Supermolet* 2009, an ongoing series that

geometry. Designed with an optimum viewing point, Blackwell observes, “The more you move around the work, the more it shows itself as an image.” When asked whether he thinks his works can be considered as objects too, given their presentation, hanging 16mm from the wall, he is, after consideration, adamant: “I want them to be both image *and* object.” One gets the feeling that, in his exploration of space and in his emerging career, Blackwell may have found some territory in which to have his cake and eat it too. □

Previous page:

Richard Blackwell, *Supermolet – Belt*, 2011, direct print on anodised aluminium, 115 x 115cm. Courtesy the artist and Flinders Lane Gallery.

This page:

Top left: Richard Blackwell, *Faultline*, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on MDF, 240 x 240 x 16cm.

Top right: Richard Blackwell, *Turn Around*, 2009, digital print and acrylics on Canadian maple and MDF, 60 x 70cm. Courtesy the artist. Private collection.

Above left: Richard Blackwell, *Flatscapes: Rocks*, 2009, digital print on aluminium, 80 x 120cm.