

SPLEEN

Conor Stein O'Shea
27.06.25 – 25.07.25

What happens when photography is let loose on the surface of art, not as a discrete medium, but as “an anti-auratic operation of reproduction and proliferation”? Forty years ago that was a radical proposition in museum critique.¹ The classifying authority of the institution, suddenly policed by the very medium it tried to exclude. Some of the artistic strategies this spurred—recursion, simulation, mimicry, duplicity—are elevated in Conor O'Shea's latest work, not as a renewal of critique, but as a hallucinatory programme developed in the cracks of it.

Because much of this art is made in a box office cubicle at the Sydney Opera House, an institutional resistance inherently shades it. There, O'Shea opens an outdated version of MS Paint and abstracts images of his recent past into various states of oblivion. Some are printed repeatedly on a single page, picturing on-the-job burnouts, others are emailed to an OfficeMax where they are printed in colour, glued to heavier paper, cut up, then dipped in hot paraffin wax—later twisted and stapled into illogical knots.

In recent works, a 12th Century tortoiseshell bowl and a sleeve of Jacobean lace are cropped, magnified and tessellated into cosmic fields. Museum and labour reinfiltate: the lace detail comes from a 17th Century painting hanging at the NGV; the bowl, though it could have once sat in a Habsburg wunderkammer, he saw while working at Bonham's Fine Art Auctioneers. They are reanimated by mediums—wax, paper, photography, sculpture—themselves bound to preserving, indexing, doubling or memorialising the world.

This deconstruction is not aimed at the museum but a mode of looking born of it. One rooted in anthropocentrism and consumption, marvel and wonder. Against it, viewing is offered as a psychic event. Materials transmute, doubling as counterfeits of their originals. They are entangled in processes of autophagy—self-consumption—that resituate the viewer. When a camera flash frozen in tortoiseshell melds with the gallery light bouncing off the wax veneer encasing it, the simulation precedes the real. Caught between both, the viewer is no longer a stable centre of perception, but dissolved along a plane that refuses a single, unified view.²

Writing in 1935, Roger Caillois drew upon insect mimicry in the natural world to reconsider the psychiatric term ‘psychasthenia’—the dissolution of the self into space—not as a psychological deficit, but as an ontological force.³ This seductive power, inherent in space itself, lures an organism to surrender their own coherence and return to the inertia of the material world. A similar temptation of space is at play in this work. It initiates processes of mimicry, self-envelopment and dissolution that, rather than antagonise, externalise or declassify, echo a compulsion within the contemporary subject to be drawn into and consumed by their environment.

Matthew Hanson, 2025

1 Douglas Crimp, “On the Museum's Ruins,” *October* 13 (1980), 41–57.

2 Self-envelopment also describes the work's production: two dimensional wall works are derived from his own exhibition history and, once abstracted, serve as blueprints for subsequent sculptures.

3 Roger Caillois, “Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire,” (Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia) *Minotaure*, no. 7, 1935.