

From Market Place to Superstore

The connections between retail product, advertising method, popular culture and art. A study focused on a Harvey Norman store in Launceston, Northern Tasmania.



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ABSTRACT

From Market Place to Superstore reflects on 21st century retail presentation of home furnishing consumer goods. In particular the artwork focuses on the lounge suite. Inside the Harvey Norman superstore, which stands on the site of a 19th century colonial marketplace, the retail space with its ironically palace-like dimensions is divided into a series of tableaux of methodically ordered furniture. Carefully chosen colour-coordinated accessories are arranged and lit by softly glowing lamps promoting seductively comfortable 'home' scenarios. Glossy catalogues take the production line furniture beyond the store to demonstrate the almost seamless retail/home experience. 'Still life' settings interact and merge with contemporary lifestyle expectations. Merchandise can be the substance of desire.

The research artwork sought to capture an art image from retailing, advertising and specific elements derived from popular commercial TV 'lifestyle' programs. The concept of the work was to ascertain if the lounge-suite-as-image retained its aura of 'aesthetic expendability'¹ and collapsed into contemporary art when transferred to the white box of the gallery space. To this end digital photographs, miniaturised models, video and actual merchandise were installed in the gallery space. Using varying scales and tactility the viewer was asked to engage in an alternative retailing experience within the Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania at Inveresk.

¹ D.McCarthy. *Pop Art*. (London : Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000), 9. Reyner Banham a member of the British Independent Group wrote 'Theory and Design in the First Machine Age' (1960). His theory called attention to an 'aesthetics of expendability' based on the constant need to stimulate market interest through stylistic change and planned obsolescence.

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Introduction

During the 1990s I made regular visits to Melbourne and noticed an increasing number of 'category killer'¹ warehouse superstores in the outer metropolitan areas. Several years later in Launceston this phenomenon was also becoming evident in the suburban landscape. My curiosity as to why this form of retailing furniture, electrical goods, office supplies, hardware and sporting goods was becoming dominant, was the starting point for my research proposal.

At the outset the complexity and breadth of corporate retailing and advertising made it difficult to decide on a study focus. This dilemma was solved when Cornwall Square, a Launceston city block, was redeveloped as a Harvey Norman superstore. At the time Launceston City Council (LCC) operated a public car park and works depot on Cornwall Square and LCC rezoning of the location from community to commercial in 1996 allowed its sale for private redevelopment.

Cornwall Square offered research opportunities documenting and studying the progress of a new superstore until it became a retail operation. Focusing on a local site offered several advantages. The site provided a tailored project for my candidacy and the development of the Harvey Norman store approximated a similar timeframe to my study period. Also, the staged development of the project presented me with an evolving retail and advertising scenario to observe, document and visually interpret in my artwork.

¹ B. Merrilees and D. Miller 'The Superstore Format in Australia: Opportunities and Limitations'. *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 30, No. 6, December, 1997, 904. Non-food superstores are defined as category killers in the sense that each time a superstore is established it may force a department store to relinquish a department (category) for example, hardware, toys or electrical.

The framework of my study encompassed background historical research and assessment of heritage values of existing buildings on Cornwall Square to redevelopment.

To extend the project beyond the local arena into a national context I visited Harvey Norman franchise stores in Victoria and Tasmania. From these visits I learned that store appearance, merchandise availability and store catalogue presentation were similar in each operation.

The research observes how advertising in today's mass media² inundates us with consumer goods containing messages informed by a clichéd reworking of elements of popular culture.³ My study reviews commercial television 'lifestyle' programs such as *Changing Rooms*,⁴ assisting in the promotion of consumer culture,⁵ seamlessly merging product information, and entertainment.

In relation to the Harvey Norman store my study proposes that particular elements of retail merchandise, advertising and commercial reality TV programs related to the home are closely connected. These connections will be examined from a viewpoint of contemporary art practice.

² Mass media advertising is advertising presented through all forms of communication – TV, radio, letterbox catalogues, Internet, magazines, newspapers, moving vehicles, billboards and sponsorship.

³ Popular culture in this instance is defined broadly as activities centred around the home, living styles and taste as presented in magazines, newspapers, in commercial TV entertainment programs and on the Internet.

⁴ 'Changing Rooms' A Nine Network TV program produced by Leeorne Hynes that gives tips on how to renovate a room on a budget. Two teams directed by interior design 'experts' change each other's living rooms. The changes are meant to shock and delight the other team and present them with a new perspective in room design and lifestyle.

⁵ Kim Humphery. *Shelf Life*, (Melbourne : Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5-6. Humphery's definition as to how consumer culture arises is through an interaction between those who have something to sell and those who look, listen, watch, wander, feel, and sometimes buy. These cultures always reflect social difference.

My own commercial background, including early studies in ticket writing and commercial art have made me aware of the influence of mass media advertising on everyday life. Consequently my critique is made through the eyes of a reasonably informed consumer as well as a visual artist. I believe in an age of rampant consumerism it is impossible for most people in the Western world to avoid being consumers of commercial product or services.

Influences on the development of my artwork have come from seminal British Pop art and its antecedents, and contemporary post Pop art embracing the everyday and consumer culture. Artists whose work or theory I have referenced are Richard Hamilton, Robert MacPherson and Takashi Murakami.

Focusing on Harvey Norman the exegesis is divided into five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 relate the history and the heritage assessment of Cornwall Square presented as a backdrop to the development of the contemporary Harvey Norman store.

Chapter 3 outlines the ascendancy of the superstore as a provider of manufactured consumer goods, and identifies the principles underlying retail methods of advertising and in-store presentation of merchandise as the stuff of dreams. It provides background information for visual interpretation and is not meant to be a scholarly study of retailing, advertising or economics.

Chapter 4 discusses sources and influences and connections made in relation to the formulation of the artwork and relates to the dolls house as

metaphor, miniaturization as a strategy, the utilization of the ready-made commodity, and the influence of Pop art and post Pop art. Comfort and style are also discussed in relation to the artwork and to contemporary Harvey Norman furniture.

Chapter 5 outlines the development of the artwork and recounts the refinement of materials and technical processes carried out to prepare the body of work for exhibition. An additional section gives my appraisal of the final exhibition with emphasis on discussion of the outcome of transferring a Harvey Norman lounge setting inside the gallery.

Appendix III contains photographs taken of the final presentation exhibition in the Academy Gallery during December, 2004.