

The biography of things review: ACCA exhibition explores extraordinary lives of ordinary objects

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VISUAL ARTS

THE BIOGRAPHY OF THINGS

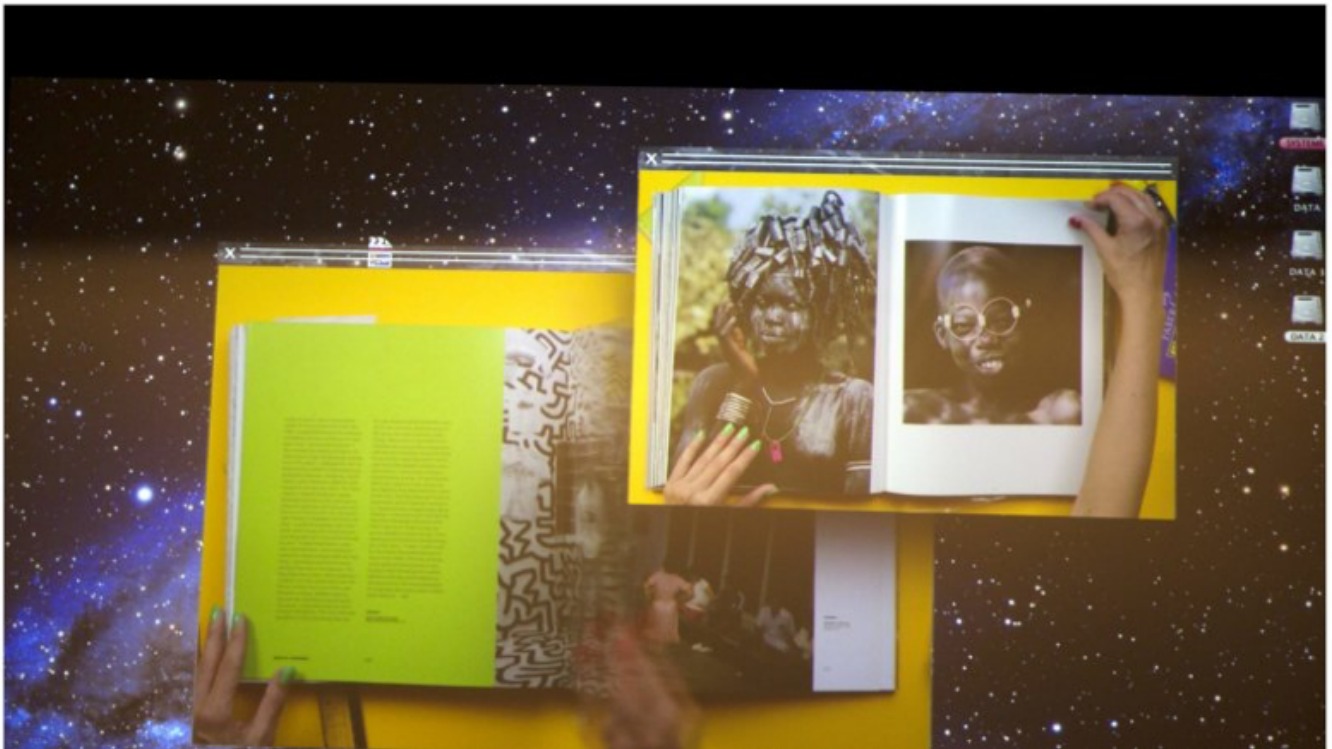


Installation view of Conservation piece by Kirsten Pieroth, part of the exhibition, The Biography of Things, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. *Andrew Curtis*

**Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), 111 Sturt Street,
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Still from Camille Henrot's video *Grosse Fatigue*, part of *Biography Of Things* at ACCA. *Simon O'Dwyer*

On a shelf mounted to the wall are several bottles and jars of lightly-coloured liquid, each labelled with *The New York Times* of a certain date. The bizarre decoctions were obtained by boiling respective editions of the newspaper, always with the same amount of water each day. The intensity of the colour depends on the amount of newsprint and area

devoted to dark pictures.

Created by Kirsten Pieroth, the liquor on display at ACCA distils the reportable world to fit in homely receptacles, such as you might keep for making jam. It is the ultimate boiling down, an extract of today's belligerence in Afghanistan, motor accidents and shootings: there you have it in a thin wash, all the debates, the suits, the market analysis, mortalities and culture.

Called *Conservation piece* – which at a glance looks like "conversation piece" – the inscrutable jars neither conserve nor converse. When today's stories are all boiled down to such a degree, all triumphs and catastrophes end up looking the same; and only their bulk or coincidental volume of advertising makes them look thicker or distinguishes them in their collapse into broth.

Pieroth's witty brew is part of a curious exhibition called *The biography of things*. Curated by Juliana Engberg, Annika Kristensen and Hannah Mathews, it alludes to the history or former life of inanimate objects. Pieroth's liquor is at an extreme, taking an object packed with information and deriving its purest fraction as a trace, as if transitioning to vapour, the elixir of newsworthiness, the essence of noise, the very humours of chaos.

These phials of daily fury poetically exaggerate the process that writers face since high school: condense, reduce, get to the nub of it, summarise. With her distillation process, Pieroth now turns this pressure of distillation on "the press", which has already economised the copy to bare bones.

The only work in the exhibition that matches the conceptual richness of *Conservation piece* is Nicholas Mangan's video *Crocodiles move fast out of water*. A female voice-over narrates an encounter with the picture of a crocodile at an airport; then a great deal of crocodile skin on fashion

apparel which is described as modern armour; then another crocodile on a Lacoste logo in the Museum of Counterfeits in Paris, and finally the story of three crocodiles sculpted in the monumental *Triomphe de la Republique* in the Place de la Nation.

Because the thrashing monsters represented the enemies of France, they were removed by the Nazis in the German occupation and have never been seen again. All of the narratives in the video are supported by documentary images that are unsettling, making you feel as if every event has an eternal backstory of malice that matches the most vicious of reptiles.

The photography of Aurelien Froment documents the stone caprices by a brilliant French postman, Ferdinand Cheval, who is one of the world's best-loved outsider artists. Froment's isolation of architectural details by means of a black cloth is spooky and nicely picks out the anomalous grandeur of the odd creations.

The installation by Ilit Azoulay and the video by Camille Henrot are both hectic assemblages that risk breathlessness. Henrot's collapsing of creation narratives and scientific evolution makes me feel uneasy with its messy satire, which the rapid pace of the video exacerbates.

The films of Paul Sietsema and Rosalind Nashashibi & Lucy Skaer dealing with the contents of museums seem slow and dull; and Walid Raad's expose of Muslim artefacts in western collections has difficulty going beyond a scrapbook.

Narelle Jubelin's two suspended minimal tables confused me with a plethora of narratives of dubious coherence, from the court proceedings of the Ploughshares Four to modernist cutlery and the sugar magnate Henry Tate (benefactor of the Tate Museum).

The most disappointing work is by Brook Andrew, a masonic vitrine

displayed without contents. This museological casket with Gothic burnt legs was used at the Ian Potter Museum last year with paraphernalia about World War I. The object definitely has a CV; but the opportunity to activate it afresh in the context of ACCA was missed. To leave the container empty seems disengaged and poetically lazy.

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