

Essay by Susannah Thompson, 2013

Tears of the Moon, Sweat of the Sun

In *I like the Silver, I like the Gold* at The Northern Charter in Newcastle, Susie Green brought together a collection of objects and art works which could be seen as a coming together of the artist's recurrent fixations and concerns over the last few years. Described as a 'showcase' rather than an exhibition or performance, the event might best be categorised as expanded object theatre in which static, stand-alone artworks on paper, silk, canvas and other materials were performed and activated for the audience by models borrowing variously from the language of auction houses, fashion shows and holistic exercise in their presentation of the works.

In shadowy, seductively lit former office spaces now occupied by *The Northern Charter* (an artist's studio complex and project space in the centre of Newcastle-upon-Tyne) the site and setting of Green's work, indeed, the entire format of the evening, worked against the grain of both the 'awkward performance' (the ones in which audiences are unwilling, embarrassed or deeply bored captives) and the 'opening where no-one looks at the art' (i.e. many exhibition openings, where the most rapt attention is reserved for the drinks table). Perhaps the most compelling aspects of *I like the Silver, I like the Gold*, in fact, was the entirely risky, but resoundingly successful gamble taken by Green that the carefully choreographed structure of the event would prove engaging and commanding enough to maintain the attention of the audience without any sense of obligation or awkwardness on their part.

The crowd wandered around, refreshed drinks and chatted quietly at times, yet throughout the forty-five minute event the undoubted focus was on the artistic activity unfolding before them, with most of the audience standing and sitting on the periphery of an expansive circle drawn on the floor in oatcakes, nuts, seeds and satsumas. As well as demarcating the space within which the action would unfold, the circle provided an imaginative space for viewers to form associations and invent narratives in response to the works and props displayed within the boundary.

Along with performers Alina Kropiwnicka and Rachel Gay who wore, held and played with each collection of works, Green herself introduced the event, setting the tone and ambience of the evening in the mode of a genial hostess. Rather than withdrawing at this point, however, whilst Kropiwnicka and Gay moved around the space, positioning objects according to loosely choreographed instructions scripted by Green, the artist herself remained present around and inside the circle, working throughout the event with photographer Mat Fleming so that the roles of models, artist and photographer overlapped and the process of documentation was itself performed.

In the synthesis of the gesture, positioning and poise of the performers and the stylised presentation and display of the works themselves (lights up for each set of works - viewing time five minutes - rotation of seven collections - each rotation announced) *I like the Silver, I like the Gold* leaned towards McLean-inspired 'pose work', the language of spectacular sporting events or even mass exercise classes. Beyond the art objects – collars, works on paper, scrunchies, cuffs, tassels - the mannered positioning of other soft objects used as props, plinths and supports such as swimming floats and yoga mats combined to trigger associations with precursors drawn from visual culture and art history. A number of both stated and implied features of the performance recalled a distinctly 1960s and '70s aesthetic – from Fleming's *Blow-Up* style direction and furious photographing of the models to Kropiwnicka and Gay's Cold War style gymnast clothing. Not least, the entire event was staged in Commercial Union House, a monolithic office block itself the product of T Dan Smith era urban planning in Newcastle city centre. Even apparently minor details

suggested late 20th century lifestyle imagery – the nuts and seeds of the circle, Panton-esque props, retro sportswear, ponytails and Sassoon-style cuts. But along with these sources, Green's work bears traces of earlier influences – the healthy body culture of early twentieth century European Modernism, specifically the work of interdisciplinary practitioners who, like Green, have situated their work at the intersection between art and fashion. Sonia Delauney's swimming costumes come to mind, as do Varvara Stepanova's clothing designs for sports. In *Shatter for Schiaparelli* (2009), a work composed of carefully cut and collaged tin foils suggesting a broken mirror, and throughout her work as a whole, it is clear why Green should find Elsa Schiaparelli's work fascinating – the glamour, the transformation of materials and the embrace of all things patterned. Reflective surfaces, the use of everyday materials used to exotic and decadent effect, the play with light, depth, tone and shadow are consistent interests for Green.

Many of the works in this expanded exhibition could be regarded as wearable sculpture or clothing that performs and the titles of some of the works emphasise this – *Zebra Slip* and *Rainbow Grip* (both 2013), for instance, are works on paper which invite the viewer to slip their fingers through the paper to enact the work. Clothes, accessories and adornment – jewellery, hair accessories, scarves & underwear – recur in Green's practice to be used, worn or displayed in interchangeable or reversible ways. The models are thus instrumental in actively presenting the multitudinous purposes to which these seemingly quotidian objects might be put. In, *I like the Silver, I like the Gold* (version 4) for example, gold and silver scrunchies can be worn to fix hair, but they can equally be worn as collars or cuffs, as well maintaining their status as stand-alone sculptural objects. Green has acknowledged her preference for portable, lightweight or small-scale works which can be packed up and transported. Clothing, then, is perhaps the ultimate example of work which can travel with the artist, easily carried and stored, works worn on the body are forms which lends themselves to an itinerant existence. But it is also the protective and transformative nature of clothing which has proved to be an enduring interest for Green, 'whereby fantasy can be made visible and one can both hide and reveal oneself'. Thus, it is the social and emotional lives of objects, the way in which we ascribe meaning and power to 'things' in our own lives, and the apparent ability of objects to embody memory and desire that are crucial to the artist, rather than an interest in 'pure form' or materiality per se. In her commitment to 'the human, the emotional and the inherently tactile', the activation of these objects via performance and staging emphasises the harmony between formality and playfulness inherent to Green's body of work. If these works were encountered outside of a performance or action, they are nevertheless suggestive of movement, inviting a response that falls between the optic and haptic. As lead singer in the band *Silver Fox* (*Upset The Rhythm*, 2013), Green has dealt with a similar encounter between viewer and object in the song *Marble World*. Writing and singing of encounters with objects in the V & A, Green's lyrics dovetail neatly with her approach to visual art. For her, 'the only way to feel is to look at it'.

Colour, material and form are often used to make memory and emotion manifest so that the work often seems to be attempt to capture or suspend fleeting, ephemeral or half-remembered images and ideas. This intention is echoed in the specific palette of her works such as the shimmering, opalescent, ice-cream hues of *Too Kind* (2012) or the use of evocative, associative pattern design, such as *Dogtooth Protection* (2013). Originating as hand-painted images on paper, the design was digitally transposed onto Silk Georgette, retaining the washy quality of watercolour paint and the translucence and semi-opacity of much of Green's spectrum. Shown draped over swimming floats in this incarnation, the scarves, like *Something, nothing* (2012) emphasise Green's preference for thin, light forms and the potential for such materials to simultaneously conceal and reveal. The scarves themselves might be used as literal veils, but throughout Green's work her materials suggest symbolic thresholds, portals and the possibility of physically crossing into liminal spaces - passing through screens, seeing through shimmering surfaces, entering mirrors, or stepping Orpheus-like into silvery, watery depths.

The dogtooth pattern - in the form of 'drawings of a print of a weave' - has become a recurrent motif in Green's work (see, for example, her 2011 solo exhibition *Sexy Being*, held in her own home. Again linking to hazy memories in terms of the origin of her interest, the artist's own description of the work recalls the skirt of a primary school teacher in which the pattern 'seemed to have a rainbow quality as the black and white sizzled together', like the child in Kate Atkinson's *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, who sees 'wallpaper small in the air'. The associative impulses or catalysts for this specific recollection are nonetheless ubiquitous as the representation of the warp and weft of dogtooth in both high end and high street fashion are enduring. And in common with many of her materials and colours, dogtooth is one which is associated as much with luxe design as with low-end garments. The tendency to be drawn to colours and designs which are variously or concurrently regarded as cheap and expensive can be seen in earlier works, such as the scaled-up gold hoops – *Fall into Gold* (2008), or, in this event, *Big Tassel* (2013), a huge ribbon and plastic silver foil tassel reminiscent as much of the accoutrements of a cheerleader as of the glitzy zip-pull of an expensive handbag. In both appearance and approach Green's works regularly reveal correspondences between apparent opposites - the visible and invisible, shyness and confidence, seriousness and humour, light and shade. Even her choice of performers reflected this, with Alina's rather self-contained, shy manner complementing and contrasting with Rachel's confident, vivacious presentation of the works. This dynamic undoubtedly added to the environment's fluctuation between formal, structured and careful orchestration and relaxed, playful improvisation.

Like the artist herself, a polymathic practitioner working across fine art, design and music, Green's work is most resolved when it embraces its own awkwardness. The charm of Green's work, its pull on the viewer, and indeed, its criticality, lie in the curious combination of self-effacement and confidence, the use of wit and playfulness in resolutely serious, committed work and the refusal of the artist to accept terms such as emotional, expressive or decorative as pejorative. The organisation, display and presentation of work in *I like the Silver, I like the Gold* represents an awareness on the part of the artist that the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts. Throughout this event Green has demonstrated her clear prowess as a performer and as an artist whose ability to stage her work has allowed for the sustained interest, perhaps even seduction, of her audience.