

ORDINANCE

presents

Cardboards Darcey Bella Arnold



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Cardboards

by Simon McGlinn

“A desire built up in me to work in a material of waste and softness. Something yielding with its only message a collection of lines imprinted like a friendly joke. A silent discussion of their history exposed by their new shapes. Laboured commonly with happiness. Boxes.”¹

Lists, tracking numbers, addresses, time stamps, barcodes, company details, branding and invoice descriptions. Cardboard is routinely tethered to information. At other times it simply withholds it. It's blank and indifferent. Cardboard is a ubiquitous material—monotonous, repetitive, dull and commonly brown. No, it's friendly and dependable. How many times has a cardboard box made carrying an array of objects possible with just two hands? It's an accessible and versatile material. Corrugated cardboard can be scored, bent, shaped, stapled, and glued into countless forms, providing protection and delivery for a vast range of products. It's a material that can be fit for purpose. It's in servitude. It's designed to be touched and bruised. It stands guard. It's machine-smoothed for efficient stacking and transport. Post function, cardboard becomes a cast off and enters a world of repurpose, recycling, or often, landfill. It drifts around us. It passes through production lines in factories, circulating along transport routes, or down the supply chain where it becomes commonly encountered as flattened debris. Often in the form of a box, it solemnly sits on shelves, in corners of rooms or in attics collecting dust and time. It's a networked material that connects industry with consumers, forming part of the globalised framework of trade.

When I asked Darcey Bella Arnold, “Why are you using cardboard as a support?” The response was pragmatic, the use of cardboard extending from a previous body of work where paper served as the support for Letraset, pencil, and acrylic. Importantly, Arnold began these works while undertaking the DESA residency in Ubud, Bali, where fine art paper might buckle under the high humidity. Cardboard offered an alternative, whilst also being able to support the materials Arnold has used previously. Freely accessible and discardable, it lends itself to be experimented on without the concern of material cost, able to be disposed of if the works were unsuccessful. It presented a distinct materiality and history, featuring creases and dents from events that are now only imaginable, alongside ghostly marks from products, remnants of advertising and technical text to engage with. These works were later completed during another residency at Police Point in Portsea, Victoria, where more boxes were found and processed by the artist.

Surveying recent predecessors to these works in the exhibition “A Measure of Disorder, Part 2” (ReadingRoom, Naarm/Melbourne, 2023), a similar material logic emerges.² The exhibition featured a collection of 30 x 30 cm works on paper displayed across the gallery walls. Each artwork shared a similar treatment, utilising a restricted material and colour developed from a productive stream of

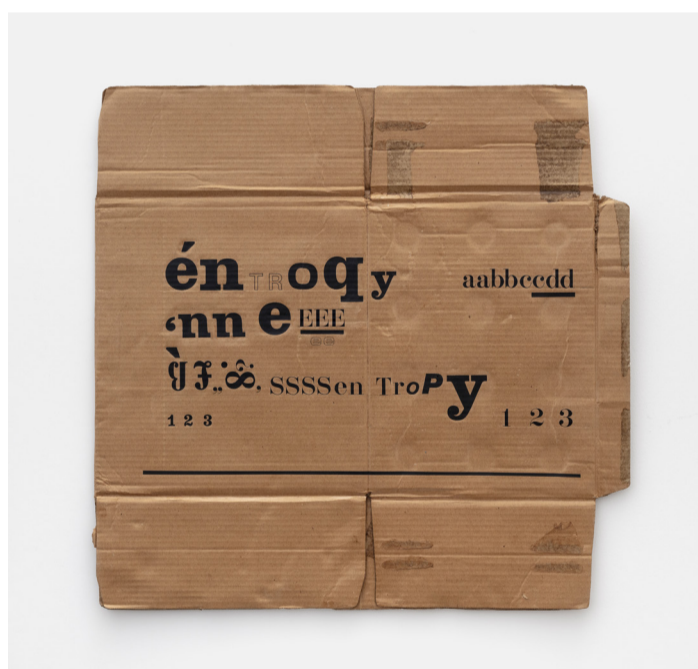
concrete poetry and abstraction that engages a network of references, pointing to artists like Louise Bourgeois, John Nixon, and Kazimir Malevich, and to Constructivism and Dada. They wove together notions of feminism, as well as concepts of entropy and atrophy. The sensation is of a cacophony. Yet, the result appears orderly. The works on paper contain a visual rhythm, all framed in the same chestnut brown stain, with an echoing colour pallet and materiality. When I consider cardboard as the successor to these works, the paper becomes familial, and the precision hang resembles an orderly storeroom or the production line. The artworks appear almost as cross-sections of boxes with exposed interiors, or the tops of boxes stamped with information that assist in creating a genealogy or mapping for the artist.

When discussing Arnold's working method, she spoke to me about how establishing and adhering to parameters develops greater output. This may explain the volume of her work. With a predetermined set of materials—Letraset, pencil, and acrylic on a support—she initiates a process of testing and experimentation. Through this process, the materials can start to communicate back to her; suggesting form, composition, or a relationship between the materials. Working from constraints allows for better control of the creative dynamics, facilitating a productive flow where hands can make decisions before conscious thought intervenes. The rhythm and pace of working within set parameters helps develop and expand a visual vocabulary. It privileges improvisation. There is freedom in constraints. It is a method where one can ‘stay in shape’ and become more fluent, Arnold speaks to how she becomes more skilled, more proficient. Producing work in volume allows the process to be traceable, making it possible to revisit and rework various permutations. This approach leaves clear evidence of studio thinking. It is a method that hones the artist, making them focused, submerged and entranced in a material play enabling them to both feed and follow the work.

I often think of cardboard, especially in a studio context, as a substitute for something else—something to experiment with before the main event. In this way, cardboard serves as a stand-in or model for other materials, allowing for projections and explorations beyond its physical form. There is a warmth to cardboard as a propositional material that fosters possibilities. When placed in an artistic context, cardboard perpetuates its original function of transportation. It transitions from a subservient role, circulating more valuable materials, to a transformative substance that endures various creative pressures. Ultimately, it assumes the role of contemplation as an artwork. This process exemplifies an alchemical transformation, turning a discarded, mass-produced material into a refined art object. Cardboard, in this context, is an inherently elastic material.

However, Arnold isn't using cardboard as a mere substitute; it serves as a legitimate support in its own right. Her cardboard

supports are found objects rather than purchased, each carrying an ingrained history, with marks from previous use and traces of their former owners, providing sources for Arnold to improvise with. For me, these scars and their humble nature evoke pragmatic sentiments from Peter Cripps' essay "Recession Art and Other Strategies", which positions Australian Art within a permanent cultural recession and encourages artists to adopt more resourceful and experimental practices.³ Cardboard is tinged with the broader cost of living and ecological crisis that is taking effect. But the resourcefulness of cardboard again makes Arnold move. She moves around commercial centres, searching for supports to work with. The activity can occur anywhere in which cardboard can be found, denoting her proclivity to glean or at least become open for cardboard to find her. Cardboard's ubiquity as a material provides a distinct pleasure in chance encounters.



Cardboard is familiar to us; it is banal and commonplace, often easily dismissed as it slips through our peripheral vision. The American artist Robert Rauschenberg was all too aware of this when he made a series of works also titled "Cardboards" (1971-72), where found boxes were sliced, opened and arranged as wall hanging works. Arnold's exhibition, titled "Cardboards," is an eponymous reference to Rauschenberg's work. In his series, cardboard takes the prime position on the wall rather than its usual subservient role and cast-off trajectory. The cardboard in Rauschenberg's series is worn and weathered, with all the bruising from travel and neglect alongside graphics and text from previous use.⁴ They look rough, like ugly stand-ins for minimalist shaped canvases. To me, they seem like an expedient way to create a large wall work using found materials. But the blunt stark quality that confronts me is balanced by a pleasure that comes from the experience of something disarmingly simple. There is a warmth to the work. Not just in its softness as a material but through a particular vulnerability and provisional quality that conveys a sense of improvisation and play that appears essential to

the work. It is this simple quality matched with the accessibility and known property of cardboard that I find particularly appealing.

In Arnold's case, cardboard acts as a singular support rather than a building block to develop complex shapes. There is a simplicity to Arnold's use of cardboard that sits alongside the qualities of softness, vulnerability and improvisation that I feel resonates through Rauschenberg's work. However, there are also distinct differences. During both residencies, I remember watching Arnold apply PVA glue and other protective mediums to the surface of the cardboards in a bid to improve the material's lifespan. The result gives the cardboards more resilience but also indicates a level of affection. At one moment, the cardboard appears more cared for, but when the thin layer of plastic glistens, it also gives the material an almost unnatural appearance. When covered in a clear medium the cardboard reflects more light, accentuating the marks and scuffs on the surface and revealing the cardboard's history in greater fidelity. I remember thinking of the cardboard in an anthropomorphic way; watching Arnold apply the PVA was akin to observing someone apply sunscreen to a body. The application emphasised the supports vulnerability. Cardboard typically has a short lifespan; it is designed to absorb damage. By applying a protective clear layer to the surface of these supports, Arnold acknowledges the material's mortality. It becomes an act of embalming, a display of Arnold's affection for the networked material - its softness and malleability, and its vulnerability and mortality.

Simon McGlenn is an artist. He recently presented "Bones from the Evening Meal," an exhibition at the Monash University Faculty Gallery, as part of his Doctorate in Fine Arts at Monash University. He is a sessional lecturer in the VCA Painting Department at the University of Melbourne.

Cardboards runs from 22 November to 22 December, 2024 at Ordinance.

Cover Image: Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery AIR Program at Monmar Police Point Shire Park and Point Nepean National Park Australia, 2024. Artist studio.

Inset: Darcey Bella Arnold, *Untitled*, 2024, Letraset and paint on cardboard, 60 x 62cm

References

1. Robert Rauschenberg. *Cardbird brochure with statement by the artist*, 1971. Los Angeles: Gemini G.E.L.
2. See: <https://areadingroom.com/exhibitions/a-measure-of-disorder-part-2/>
3. Peter Cripps, *Recession Art and Other Strategies*, exh. cat. 1985. Brisbane, Institute of Modern Art.
4. See: <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/galleries/series/cardboards-1971-72>