



# One Atom That Was You

by Sally O'Reilly

Christina Mackie's practice echoes that of a scientist, mapping units from one system of understanding onto another

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You have probably noticed how a star disappears when you look straight at it, as if too much attention has snuffed it out. A star is a blaze of modesty, as shy as a dazzling maiden embarrassed by the riches nature has bestowed on her. There is, of course, a scientific explanation for this phenomenon – the cones and rods, the nerve endings that perceive light in the retina, are distributed so that those activated in low-light conditions are concentrated around the edge, creating a central night-time blind spot – but the sensation remains, nonetheless: metaphorical, and suffused with wistful beauty.

Christina Mackie's work relates to the world in a similar way. It cannot be directly interrogated or it will retreat; it refuses to be analysed reductively and must be looked at askance, even though it consists of clear concepts that originate in the world of experience and thought. Each apparently discrete work is an element embedded in a larger, encompassing work, which, in turn, has roots that can be traced back to previous pieces. Each object is implicated in the history of its conception while bearing the consequences of its production.

Mackie is perhaps best known for *suppression, repression, depression compression* (1995), her series of diminishing polystyrene cups, each one compressed by incrementally increased atmospheric pressure in a laboratory, and for *Intron Image Project* (1999), in

which a vial of DNA was configured from a drawing of the artist's cat. Consequently the notion persists that she is a 'sci-art' artist, an empirical explorer of substance and subject matter. Mackie herself, on the other hand, talks about the cups as the embodiment of more schematic concepts of compression, which may have emotional or political or historical analogies. DNA technology, too, is more like a pivotal point around which a conceptual shift can turn. Mackie considers science as a human endeavour, with its own poetics and aesthetics to be added to her infusions. Coming from a family of biologists, she draws parallels between her studio-based practice and that of a scientist. Between the 'eureka' moments that punctuate the history of science there are periods of waiting for something to make itself clear and gradients of normalization, when epiphanies are absorbed into the language of utility. Similarly, there is a moment of flow, when things are going so right that it's as though all decisions have been the best possible ones. On the other hand, when this flow dries up, the studio-based artist becomes more like a technologist, trying to find the means to a solution, to manufacture the image conceived by the imagination.

Conceptually, rigour is all-pervading: for instance, the implications of the pixillated Frankenstein of a video image as opposed to the analogue *doppelgänger* of the slide projection are painstakingly





Left: *suppression, repression, depression compression* 1995 Polystyrene cups Dimensions variable Above: *Petalhead Sketch* 2003 Watercolour on paper 23x31cm  
All images courtesy: Herald Street, London

thought through. Practically, too, the research is exhaustive, trying out fixings, materials, combinations and contexts. Mackie's research has involved travelling for weeks around her native Canada to find just the right type of reaction ferries (boats comprising sections of road and underwater 'sails' using the force of the current to traverse rivers, guided by a cable), bringing 50 trees into leaf early with an artificial spring synthesized by full-spectrum, 1000-watt lamps in her studio/bedroom, 18 hours a day for two months, and exploring how to fabricate giant rocks or join rope into a continuous ring.

Writing about Mackie's work is like rooting around in the attic of a formidable explorer. There are groups of types of things, discordant stuff and disembodied bits. Each body of work feels as though it is constrained by a temporary dam that might be breached at any moment. Associations and prompts are as open-ended and as entangled as a hairball. The perimeter of an exhibition is like the edge of a page that contains a poem: an accumulation of vocabulary and syntax that has been collated accurately and specifically but nonetheless bleeds off the edge, into the viewers' outer orbits of comprehension. To decode the work is to denude it, to split up a family, to impoverish it somehow. You can break it down into some lovely pithy phrases, but then the poetic form has always been more revered than the flashy *bon mot*. Also, these complexes of private thoughts and observations are vulnerable to misreadings. They are so carefully wrought, with such a filigree of abstracted specifics, so nuanced – and so easily grasped by the crude handle of a title or a representational element. Mackie is generous in offering narrative cues devoid of didacticism, but the viewer may be tempted to dampen them into meaning or a message.

In fact, an idea may grow from the tiniest spore. *Breughel Boots* (1999) came out of standing next to an ashen figure on the London

Underground and thinking about all the sick people who must die on the network every year. A video shot on an underground platform shows commuters from the knees down, walking away from the camera towards unknown futures, some of their feet animated by rotoscopic painting, as if the mark of their fate. As a counterpoint to this anxious thought, another monitor displays the image of tree-tops stroking the sky. Mackie's solo exhibition in 2003 at Magnani, London, evolved from a peculiar habit the artist has of tracing the outline of flower petals on the back of her hand. Methods of crowd profiling and surveillance incorporate the study of these 'defining habits', or behavioural fingerprinting. Mackie amplified this tic and made it tangible in the form of image and object: large plastic petals on a wooden stem, black leather petals (made from remnants of a coat she had made for herself) conjoined at a crystal ball atop a painted sculpture of a rock, and an animation in which her hands can be seen moving sheets of lighting gels from one stack to another to form a compound petal image. This animation was conceived as an attempt to depict a head with a colourful aura, plucked at and depleted until black-out – the final frames using a process of accumulation to create the image of an act of depletion.

Mackie's inventions, like good scientific curiosity, overturn hierarchical structures. Working drawings are as vital as the finished product: a piece may exist in a sketchbook for a year, being re-worked, cogitated over or 'cooked', as it were. Soft and hard science commingle; psychology and microbiology often inhabit a single object. Mackie considers a crystal ball as a metaphor for sight as valid as a cedarwood platform as a reference to scandalous free-trade laws that enabled the USA to cash in on Canadian softwood lumber. Both inward-looking and externally reflexive, responsible and indulgent, the work reminds me of a half-remembered quote from a



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forgotten book which suggests that the soul is to the body as sight is to the eye. Mackie absorbs and harbours information and radiates it back out into a universe already pullulating with ideas.

Perhaps another useful way of thinking about these pieces is as moods, influenced by temperament, circumstances, chemicals in the brain, memories, expectation, the absence and presence of people and things. A mood is a story you can tell yourself, but which is difficult to convey; it can be infected by shades of other emotions that eventually infect it into another state of mind. This is a very good way to respond to Mackie's work: at once internal and affecting, reactive and transmissive, yet never wholly intact, static or contained.

Mackie does not consider a book to have an inviolable autonomy. *The Feeling of Being Found Out* (2001), for example, functioned as an adjunct to a gallery-based piece made at CCA Kitakyushu, Japan. The first section contains a concurrent set of timelines, each pictured in another slightly divergent language; the final section is like a tail, another progression or appendage. Throughout the first half, double-page reproductions of watercolours – schematized snapshots of a sunrise – provide a substratum over which other pictorial progressions are etiolated or compacted. The sunrise paintings are themselves the product of a rather peculiar procedure. Mackie has developed a chromatic shorthand, noting down something as complex as a landscape or a sky as a series of abbreviated paint names. The notebook carries the image as raw data, or pictorial DNA, which is then expanded into an image in a two-stage process, via the specialist knowledge of a painter. 'Indigo, (ant.), cob. (mang.), cer., w.e., l.y., c.y., c.y.d. + vermilion. D.g.? w.sep r.umb., purple lake + indigo?, p.l. + p.g., p.l. + h.g.', for instance, is unpacked into 'indigo (via antwerp blue to) cobalt blue (via manganese blue to) cerulean blue, winsor emerald, lemon yellow, cadmium yellow, cadmium yellow deep, and vermilion; maybe davy's grey, definitely not warm sepia, raw umber, purple lake and indigo or purple lake and paynes grey; no, in fact, it's purple lake and hookers green'.

Punctuating these pastoral sunrises, photographs of serene moments taken during the artist's life – empty interiors, undulating landscapes, fireworks and odd corners of things – are imbued with unknowable significance. These painterly and photographic elements are the inverse of one another: comprehensible imagery

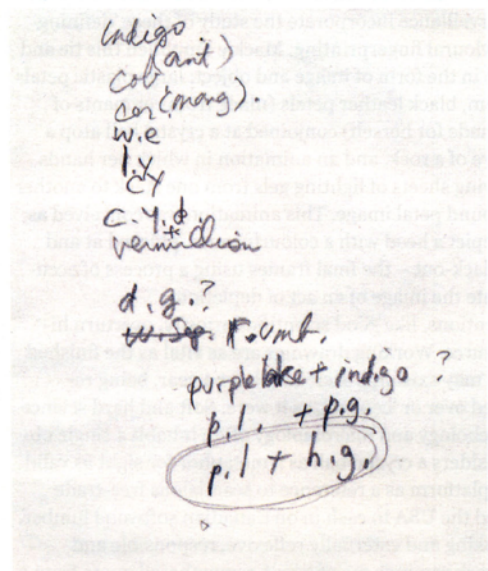
with invisible, coded provenance in contrast to distinct glimpses of an incomprehensible whole. Doodly marginalia and ghostly drawings float within the ether of the sunsets like thoughts, while along the top a poem in Japanese and English reads like a phrase book of conjunctions ('from then on / afterwards / long time / on the edge of ...'), skirting around the nouns and verbs that it would normally be attached to.

Part-way through, a flick-book animation of the Earth illustrates the shifting of the continents, from the Pangaea era (225 million years ago) to a configuration beyond the current continental configuration; then there is a shift in page position, and a cobalt violet stain spreads throughout the drawing's oceans. This represents the incident when the Russian nuclear submarine *Kursk* sank in the Barents Sea just off Murmansk with the loss of all its crew. The incident was also a potential ecological disaster and eclipsed all of the artist's other concerns at the time. It is often as though content jostles for priority, muscling itself into the work, insinuating itself to Mackie, who is the chef, the choreographer and newscaster.

So, in *The Feeling of Being Found Out* the diurnal undertow of a sunrise is hitched to the geological time of continental drift, the artist's lifespan and the potential end of the world. Mackie often maps scales, calibrations, co-ordinates and units from one system of understanding onto another in this way. *Intron Image Project*, for instance, involved the re-encoding of the x- and y-axis of drawing into a double helix in base four, which was translated into the four DNA markers. This was then synthesized in a laboratory, producing a vial of serum to be injected into poplar trees. What monster might this generate? In fact, the DNA was never introduced into the trees; perhaps there would have been too many cultural misunderstandings for the translation to work anyway. There is a story about island dwellers who, on seeing mounted soldiers for the first time, think they are centaurs – some phenomena are beyond comprehension to those with incompatible experience. The poplars may not have been able to read genetic text derived from a drawing of a cat, but it is the mere potential outcome that lurks as a chimera in the imagination. For Mackie curiosity, reciprocity and a ceaseless unfolding of connections and possibilities are the dynamics of an artwork, while its materiality is a metonym of this alchemical process.

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Left: *Sunrise list* (detail) 1987 Notebook and pencil 23x17cm Right: *Breughel Boots* 1999 Video still





Installation view at Magnani, London 2003