

Warehouse Republic

Excerpts from a conversation between Ingvar Kamprad (b. 1926, Sweden) and Frank Lowry (b. 1930, Czechoslovakia):

Ingvar: Lifestyle is a strong word, but I do not hesitate to use it. I wanted to create a better everyday life for the many, which also consists of breaking free from status and convention – becoming freer as human beings.

Frank: I think you could say a mix of knowledge, opportunity and a willingness to learn as we went, is how Westfield was born. I learned to value the small transactions as well as the large.



Euclidean Display Unit, detail, 2013



Cornice, 2014

In Plato's Republic, the philosopher speaking through his teacher Socrates, sets a scene:

Behold! Human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets...And do you see, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall?

"You have shown me a strange image," Socrates' companion appropriately notes, "and they are strange prisoners." This intricate, bizarre set up, come to be known in shorthand as Plato's Cave, was his way of displaying his understanding of how we see the world. Forms and ideals exist, and while we can conceive of them, our knowledge is indirect, inaccurate, and just a shadow of the actual concept. Walther Benjamin, in his unfinished Arcades Project, saw the Paris Metro as his contemporary Cave in the 1930s: people bound in subterranean carriages, travelling from station to station along an abstracted route, disassociated from how it actually connects them to the geography above. At street level, though, it was hardly much more enlightened, finding as he did in the Parisian neoclassical shopping galleries the idealised remnants of an outdated consumer culture. If only he had lived to see the process multiply, invert, explode and spread itself a thousandfold globally.

Excerpt 2:

Ingvær: For me the initial idea is key. You must begin with the ideal concept: the perfect chair, the simple shelf, the perfect room. You then take these ideals and bring them into the world in suitable forms.

Frank: You can push the envelope but only so far. I know some people believe in sticking to your knitting but if I took that literally I would still be running a delicatessen in Blacktown.

We enter a room filled with shapes: triangles, cylinders, rectangles, spheres. An elongated pyramid huddles shyly in the corner, while an arching 'S' shape thrusts itself upwards, each propped up by supplemental wedges, circles and platforms. These are weary performers, each paused as if self-consciously caught in the act of getting ready to go on stage but not quite yet fully composed. These are temporary, made-up scenes, instances of interrupted characters who are looking at us over their shoulder. Or maybe that's just their coy impression, staged and displayed as they are. As we approach, cautiously, each dominant actor gives way to the myriad of textures and colours that constitute it. Unexpected confrontations of bathroom tiling and Jesmonite, domestic rugs and rough concrete, mirror and rubber flooring. The scene unfolds and dissolves into the details.

Iain Hales' sculptural tableaux seem to begin as forms, or rather ideas of forms. Notions of shapes and colours that, perhaps like Plato believed to hover somewhere above the Earth, are summoned into the process of coming into existence. On the way, along with taking on dimensions and materiality, they also seem to inevitably attract a range of nods and references, from art historical genres to DIY tips. They never quite settle, though; despite their weight and markings an uneasy otherworldliness remains. Their surfaces give it away: everything is almost overly textured, touched, felt up, as if high on the possibility of having taken a material form. There's also a sense of the surface trying to make itself look perfect, trying to re-attain some sense of the ideal form it was derived from.



Untitled (Composition), 2014



Odalisque, detail, 2014

Excerpt 3:

Ingvar: In IKEA, the steered customer flow system was developed to assist this. We create a total home environment: a complete identity in each display, sometimes a complete family, that can then be chosen from.

Frank: I suppose we found that a unifying soundtrack is helpful for the customer experience, but Westfield is the opposite; we try to gather together as many voices as possible. People find themselves in several retailers, mix and match a patchwork of who they are. If you begin from such a set position, how can you adapt?

Ingvar: The company tests many new solutions constantly, and they are gradually introduced into the stores when proven successful. To the regular visitor, many of these changes are probably hardly recognisable. This model is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Even so, it is amazing how many of the old truths have stood the test of time.



Euclidean Display Unit, 2013

The unsteady dioramas that result are Pop display units, their wild syntax and voracious material quotations a presentational mode that perhaps we can find parallel in in the hybrid panopticon of the mall, in their colourful window displays clashing one against another. Each display holds its own attempt to allure, a vision of a lifestyle in which an ambiguous two-way projection takes place. Simplified, it can be seen as a process of recognition (seeing yourself, or an aspect of yourself) or a process of imposition (a character or trait which is desired and then assumed). The direction, and hierarchies, of this process is atomised in Hales' work. We have multiple sources and subjectivities we can attempt to align in these works, and most likely fail; they remain bristling and unresolved. Previous commentators have found in the use of materials like Formica or Celotex in the work of Richard Artschwager a "perversion of objectivity", implying that we naturally perceive industrial materials as more neutral and impersonal. What happens, then, after decades of clean manufactured surfaces have become subsumed into our daily lives? Hales' combination of industrial manufacture, artisan materials, and manual imprints, mashing the display histories of art, commerce and the home, creates an intricate back and forth of recognisable worlds and conflicting desires.

These model display units suggest that the Caves of our time might be something more like the Paris arcades, in the vast, comprehensive indoor shopping experiences we put ourselves through; visions paraded before us on cute little conveyor belts, mazes of choices of which model of which phone, and which national cuisine to eat, all under one roof. We become disoriented, lost in versions of lifestyles passing before our eyes. Hales' work runs against the normative forces of institutionalised IKEA neo-minimalism, instead projecting a point after the mall; his abstracted, ruined displays come from a warehouse republic not that far off in our future. These artefacts and ruins are reluctantly optimistic, pointing in their transformations a way of returning to the form, to colour, to light, a way of navigating out. Taking on the role of the artist as idealist in a post-apocalyptic mall world, Hales wills us to imagine that sensuous recreation is still possible, wills us to imagine freeing ourselves from the mall-cave, stumbling outside into the sunshine.

Chris Fite-Wassilak



Odalisque, 2014