

Oliver Wearne Sits on A Fence

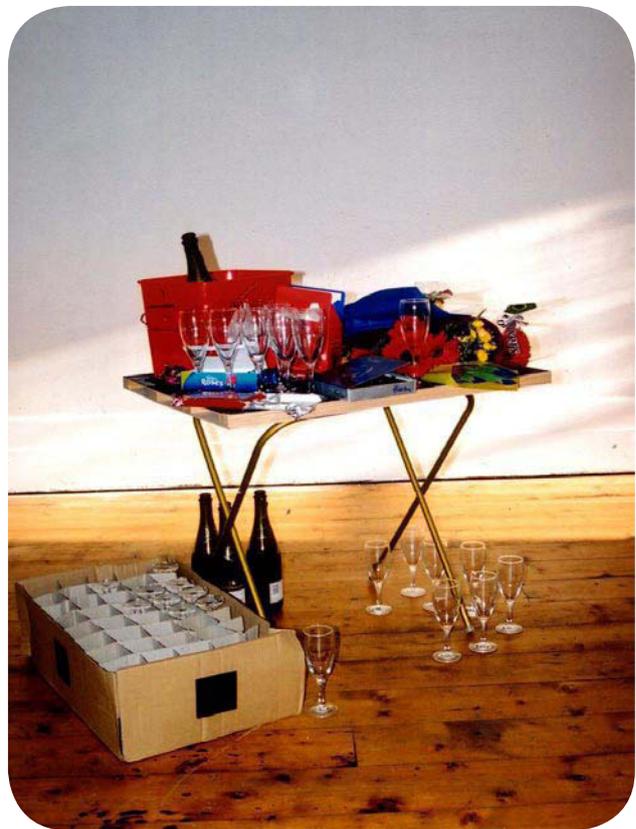
The series of earnest statements that announced Oliver Wearne's 2003 exhibition *More Practice* at CLUBSproject Inc. sprouted the word 'practice' as though they were drafted in a proposal-writing seminar. They left unanswered a question – was Wearne actually serious?

This exhibition involves the presentation of a body of disparate projects: all of which feature my investigations into daily practice, what daily practice means to me and the public presentation of that practice. This investigation makes up a significant component of my art practice.

Wearne's statement walks the line between cringe and irony. Effortlessly alluding to a turps and red wine artistic personae but also to a post-Nauman professionalism based on projects, practice, exercises and an MFA – it makes me wish I spent more time in my studio and conjures an idealised notion of a practice full of trial, error and limitless time systematically divided amongst different exercises. Wearne's show feels like the fabricated output of a fictional artist who has achieved this ideal of a disciplined practice. Its conceit is naked and knowing. The work straddles contradictions: it is earnest but whimsical, pathetic but coolly reflexive, conceptual yet deeply personal. My admiration of this idiosyncratic, gestural practice is such that what follows is not so much a review as a partial exploration and narration of the ambiguities that characterise Wearne's projects in *More Practice*.

Any retrospective has a form of finality even when the artist is young and still making work. Two photographs titled *All my work that hasn't been lost, stolen or destroyed* depict a range of 2D and 3D media leaning and stacked against a garage brick wall. This is no chance to explore an oeuvre as these enlarged snaps are poorly lit, grainy and shy of revealing any sense of frontality. At the ripe age of 24 Wearne is positing a grand ending, documentation of the site where an artist's work might end up and a question that sits against the wishful thinking of a just recently graduated artist that a practice will last forever. In the bubbliest of bubble writing next to these work an 8 x 8 canvas states *PRACTICE MORE PRACTICE*. The sign is part mantra, part cheerleader, part depressing antidote to the neighbouring photographs.

With a similar resonance *Love Me(sculpture)* celebrated Wearne's first solo exhibition in Melbourne in a style rarely seen in Fitzroy. Five bottles of champagne (on ice), five bunches of flowers and five boxes of chocolates played as props to a host and gifts to a popular artist. More than simply the artistic equivalent of a vacuum cleaner-created hickey, this was a sculpture with a function – offering punters a nibble and a drink in the natural context of an exhibition opening. There was a type of love in the air as patrons grabbed their second chocolate and sipped free booze. Need a ceramicist's opening be the only place you can find a dip and a mini-quiche?



Top: Oliver Wearne, installation of *4am paintings* and *All my work that hasn't been lost, stolen or destroyed*, dimensions variable, CLUBSProject Inc, Melbourne, 2002. **Bottom:** Oliver Wearne, *Love Me(sculpture)* 2004, Chocolates, champagne, strawberries and mixed media, 100cm x 120cm x 100cm approx. Image courtesy of the artist.

Amid the hummos and flatbread vibe of his own art school graduation Wearne chose to bypass and also heighten the debutante phenomenon. A wall painting that took cues from folder decoration, line-colour-shape design exercises and possibly Kandinsky was



Oliver Wearne, *4am paintings*, oil and canvas, dimensions variable, 2003.

lying filed and bunged in the four metre square granted to him by the department. Wearne the debutante failed to arrive and got his 15-year old brother to conceive and execute the painting. This gesture wasn't just a lame artificially dramatic performance. Wearne had left the country for Hamilton, New Zealand, so organising a system for his representation at his graduate exhibition was a necessity. Yet it was still a super-nice gesture to entrust an adolescent sibling with his "vision". It recalls Warhol's artist talks where a factory member would disguise themselves as Warhol. Even if it was a chore-like responsibility for the brother, the gesture encapsulates Wearne's mixing of family and the business of conceptualism; an emotive process bound by a rigid system of representation. Like his mother's found doodles represented at scale, and then methodically enlarged by five, ten, twenty and monumentally to one hundred per cent, it was simple and nice. And yes, there's something very scary about big mummy doodle.

Wearne likes it uncomfortable. In *More Practice* five canvases titled *4am paintings* line the wall and lean against the floor. Four am is an uncomfortable hour of the morning. Either too late or way too early. The images are graphic stylisations of smiles, grids, webs, and a big hello. They suggest screen-savers, television test-patterns, nightmares or B-grade alien tattoos. We could contextualise this exercise under the critique of the eternal burning flame of inspiration blah blah that an artist might want to live up to. But there are not enough 4am paintings to represent the prolific and they are too refined and clinical to be attributed to an artist's catharsis. Wearne continually shifts emotional registers by allowing the audience to inflict their own pathetic baggage on simple references. The painting *Help Yourself* (again a text painting in bubble writing) is a case in point. The work sits between a photographic portrait of Wearne (à la Baselitz) with an

upside down frown digitally altered into a smile and a hurdle situated in front of an open window seemingly inviting self-harm. The work alludes to self-help in the sense of hospitality (help yourself to a glass bubbly) and Oprah-style self-improvement (that seems forlorn and defeatist next to the unusable hurdle and the photoshopped cosmetic smile).

Wearne wears his low-fi melancholy on his sleeve. While his show huddles into one corner of the CLUBSproject space there is great density in the display. There is a refreshing contrast between Wearne's tone and the slick, highly-refined craft promoted by art-world PR. Wearne substitutes highly-refined product with highly-refined process. His style of compulsive exercise is usually found in a pedagogic environment where actions are repeated so results can be compared and improved. Wearne seems to have little interest in progress or betterment and instead engages in monotonous repetition for its own sake. In *More Practice* exercise equals practice (with a capital P) equals process equals a de-emphasis on finality. Knowing we can't get it right, exercise in the gym or the studio must inevitably embrace failure.

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