

# Raquel Ormella

Work 1

130 Davey Street / Essay by Bec Dean



## 130 Davey Street

Bec Dean, curator, The Performance Space, Sydney (2008)

Raquel Ormella's *130 Davey Street* is a drawing installation comprised of a collection of spatially arranged and stacked whiteboards of various sizes and physical conditions. In its three incarnations at Artists Space, New York (2005), Mori Gallery, Sydney (2005) and the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne (2006) the installation was framed by half-painted walls of flat, beige paint - evoking the colour scheme of standard, small office environments and Australian domestic property rentals. While the installation is an accumulation of entirely generic, man-made materials – whiteboards, permanent markers and house paint – what it represents in sections across these shiny, white surfaces, are images from a very specific office, the Wilderness Society's Hobart Campaign Centre, devoted for decades to environmental conservation – more recently to the protection from logging, of old growth forest environments in Tasmania.

An encounter with this work is not a simple exchange for any viewer, it requires some work to visually interrogate its aesthetic layers, as well as the cultural and political references that Ormella brings into play. In the first instance, the drawings themselves engage with the viewer's understanding and perception of colour and use of perspective within the western art tradition, translated upon a surface created not for such contemplation, but for the easy absorption of dot-points, Gant charts and timetables, by people who work in offices. The drawings range from outlines of the busy clutter of desks and office spaces, to coloured-in copies of posters, signs as well as other ubiquitous whiteboards (listing campaign goals and statistical information), all rendered within the

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limited, flat spectrum of permanent pen. In some instances, the artist employs only royal blue and red ink, laying two monochromatic drawings on top of one another so that one has to concentrate intensely to pull the separate images apart. There is a kind of violence and discord in these compositions that further amplifies the dissociated, plastic materiality of the work from the natural world, which is ultimately where *130 Davey Street* refers back to.

Embedded within Ormella's drawings are illustrations of photographs and paintings – images by Australian photographers and artists that became synonymous with the Wilderness Society's conservation movement in Tasmania. In particular, Ormella identifies Peter Dombrovskis' *Rock Island Bend* taken in the early 1980's when Tasmania's hydro-electric project threatened the now protected Franklin River system. The Wilderness Society's persistent use of the image was considered largely responsible for turning public opinion in favour of saving the river. Quite simply, it brought the inaccessible, untouched splendour of the wilderness into people's homes.

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Along with other Dombrovskis images, and reproductions of Australian landscape paintings, *Rock Island Bend* is depicted within the flattened-down fabric of Ormella's drawings as almost part of the furniture; hidden behind files; sitting next to signs of protest and peeping over the top of crowded desks.

This was no fiction, but as Ormella found the works when she visited and photographed the offices in Hobart. As such, the artist's interpretation of her own photographic pictures containing such significant images as simple marks on a whiteboard, bestows *Rock Island Bend* and other key works from Wilderness Society propaganda with the same importance in this context as technology, communication and labour in the dissemination of political ideology and campaign platforms. On one level, the images could be considered demeaned within the quotidian clutter of office life, but I see this rather as a democratic vision, where an artist's work can be held in equal regard to what many consider to be the more important workings of our society. In Ormella's work, these photographs implicit and key to the functionality and purpose of an office and an organisation.