

## The illusion of control: Torie Nimmervoll's *Objecthood*

Some friends of Torie Nimmervoll's recently received an envelope in the mail with strict instructions: we were to open and complete the enclosed survey at a particular moment of a particular day (and not before). The survey was bureaucratic and politely bossy. Respondents were required to make an inventory of a strange list of objects, describing them with a specific degree of detail (but no more). Cricket ball, guitar pick, knitting needles, olive, scale rule, butter, Bible, Metallica album, small table, chess board. This is a small sample of the list. Respondents had to weigh their butter, count their olives, and describe the exact dimensions of a knitting needle. No downloads or burnt copies of Metallica's *Black* were valid.

Nimmervoll's work frequently involves measurement and data, but like a bad scientist, she collects the data any way she likes and then does whatever she wants with it. She encodes it mysteriously using semaphore symbols and specific shades of yellow; she retrospectively measures the ambient temperatures of historical events; and in *Objecthood* she makes three-dimensional lists of aestheticised objects.

What you see in the gallery are some of these surveys transposed into sculptural objects using reductive and selective strategies of formal and chromatic standardisation. Nimmervoll apparently gives over her art-making decisions to a selection of friends. However, the resulting group of elegant still lifes belies a level of disobedience to her self-imposed process. The tight composition of colour and shape suggests an inner struggle between compliance and defiance of the arbitrariness of the survey's results.

Ostensibly the shape, quantity and colour of the sculptural elements in the gallery are determined by the data gathered from the surveys. But through the subjective processes of standardising and idealising the particularities of the respondents' belongings, representation and abstraction become complicated. "The objects that represent butter are yellow because *butter* is yellow" the artist insists. But what kind of yellow? It can't be an accident that that particular shade of yellow looks so good with that blue.

There is a struggle here between holding on and letting go; between tight and loose; between obedience and self-control. The artist tries paradoxically to surrender control of the artistic process by designing a set of rules she must obey. But she finds loopholes in her own system that allow her to get the result she *really* wants. And there's nothing she can do to stop herself. This is where the strength of this work lies, in the unapologetic impurity of her process. By refusing to obey her own attempts to renounce her control over the art-making process, she has achieved what she set out to do – she has defied her own impulse to control and allowed the entry of the contingent and the circumstantial, of aesthetic preference, whim and taste.

Her friends and the viewer are drawn into this beguiling system of rules which the artist may break or bend at will. We can try and work out the right answer, but it is more satisfying to accept the invitation to join her in the earnest delight of serious play.