

The Managing Director of JBH MFG

An essay to accompany *Signals! Solutions!* by Eleanor Woodhouse

Earlier this year, the Auckland Showgrounds played host to EMEX, the largest trade show for the engineering, manufacturing and electronics sectors in Aotearoa. In attendance was Jack Hadley, in a covert capacity as the Laree-Payne-represented artist preparing for his next show, and in the officially registered capacity as managing director of the newly formed, and entirely fictional, rapid prototyping company JBH MFG. Infiltrating the trade show in this role, Hadley was assuming yet another persona in service of an art practice characterised by plurality and a reckless disregard for disciplinary boundaries. Some of Hadley's hats include: artist; jeweller; furniture designer; fashion designer; electrical engineer; industrial engineer; managing director of a rapid prototyping company. Most of these personas have contributed to *Signals! Solutions!*, collaborating to produce a range of solutions to the problems of contemporary domesticity, spiritual and artistic nourishment, and personal style.

Necessitating the recent addition of a business role to Hadley's roster are the advancements of *Signals! Solutions!* which reflect a growing interest in production efficiency. Hadley regularly adopts the logic and aesthetic language of manufacturing and applies them to unlikely objects, including one-off furniture editions that often possess an ersatz modularity. For *Signals! Solutions!*, Hadley has progressed this interest to the point of designing his own functioning modular furniture system: a production run of 18 stools (or tables), proving that there is elegance inherent to efficiency.

The stools are numbered 1-18 in large stencil cutout, and here Hadley plays with two contradictory systems at once: the edition within fine art (indicating scarcity) and the serial number within manufacturing (indicating abundance). Constructed from sheets of aluminium and assembled using a simple tab-and-slot industrial joint system, the forms draw attention to their own construction via their bright and contrasting colours, which peek out of the joint slots like sprays of punctuation. For the configurations seen here, Hadley played the part of both toymaker and lucky child; once the parts had been delivered to his studio, he assembled them by mixing and matching according to his satisfaction and whim on the day. They are not *like* flat-pack furniture, they *are* flat-pack furniture.

Much joy can be found in Hadley's work for the ways that seemingly unrelated or opposing subjects are revealed to be singing variations of the same song. Modular toys and modular industrial infrastructure; the exquisite good taste found within publications like *World of Interiors*, and the cheap, wonderous world of AliExpress; adaptable medical equipment and fine jewellery. And Hadley also has an uncanny ability to detect *joie de vie* in the most unlikely of places: production lines; pedestrian crossings; visual merchandising; AliExpress (always, always AliExpress). In *Signals! Solutions!* Hadley helpfully emphasises the particular *vie* of factory infrastructure via his blinking, stacked lamps. These are based on the "safety signalling solutions" that he encountered at EMEX, which take the form of small sirens

stacked in any number and range of colours. In the context of Hadley's gaze they resemble children's stacking blocks, and can communicate messages such as "safe" and "unsafe" and, I also imagine, messages like "not looking too good," "hold on a moment," and "probably fine". Hadley's lamps blink at each other across the gallery, imitating the rules that humans programme into electrical objects so that they may communicate something to us. In this case, possessed with Hadley's peculiar not-quite-anthropomorphism, they may just be communicating to each other.

For *Signals! Solutions!* Hadley brings ostensibly disparate disciplines together in chorus, and has constructed from them his own idiosyncratic language. This language of frivolity, excess, and whimsy not only delights but speaks articulately of very serious subjects like value production, the machinations and flows of global industry, and the social constructions of taste. In this way, Hadley's work approximates the poles of the self-expressing child and the cultural critic.

As the novelist Kurt Vonnegut once wrote of an imaginary modernist mural located on a fictional Caribbean island, Hadley is in possession of a kindergarten boldness. By this I don't just mean that his works resemble objects in a kindergarten (which they usually do) or that their visual language is both confident and disarmingly, deceptively naïve (which it always is). I mean that he blithely sails past convention with the determination, singularity of vision and indifference to tradition rarely seen past the age of four. In Hadley's case, this indifference doesn't stem from ignorance; rather, he delights in a purposeful subversion of the norms and boundaries of the disciplines he works across.

And in fact Hadley's practice is grounded in a particularly deep knowledge of art, design, jewellery, and fashion histories, which he playfully manipulates. For example, many of his furniture pieces, including the 18 stools of *Signals! Solutions!* knowingly possess both the modernist urge for an unassailable logic and the postmodernist urge to assail it. And it is this knowledge that helps Hadley occupy so many distinct disciplines so confidently. He is always an insider, never a guest, evidenced by the creators and critics from the worlds of contemporary art, design, and jewellery who all naturally discuss his work using their own vernacular, and assume him as one of their own. Perhaps the world of business should now be added to this list. It is my hope that JBH MFG has a prosperous quarter ahead of them – may the rapid prototyping continue.

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