

A Hard Day's Night: The Treatment of Collaged Works on Paper by Artist David McDiarmid

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ABSTRACT

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) was recently given the opportunity to acquire several works by Australian artist David McDiarmid, as part of an agreement with the executor of his estate, Dr. Sally Gray. This paper focuses on the treatment of 3 collage works on paper, from a suite of 14, in preparation for a retrospective show of the artist's work to be held in 2014 at the NGV. All of the works were in need of interventive treatment, with each work containing fully delaminated and/or missing elements. As a result of this there were many ethical questions that arose prior, during and after treatment. Consultation between several conservation departments, as well as the custodian of the works, meant that this treatment became a wonderful example of collaboration and research within the lab and provided an opportunity to problem solve together.

Keywords David McDiarmid, collaboration, paper conservation, photographic conservation, ethics, loss compensation

INTRODUCTION

David McDiarmid was an Australian artist whose major body of work examines themes of political, cultural and sexual concerns of Gay Liberation between the 1970s and early 1990s. McDiarmid was born in Hobart, Tasmania in 1952 and died in Sydney, New South Wales of HIV AIDS related illness in 1995. Throughout his short life McDiarmid produced a large body of work in both Australia and America, particularly in New York, where he spent lengths of time in the late seventies. The appeal of popular culture and the glamour of advertising, as well as highly political and critical social theory are recurring themes throughout McDiarmid's work allowing his compositions to unite the visually pleasurable, perverse, camp and ironic layers between commercial and popular culture and the world of high-art, much in the same way American pop art did during the same time period (Gray 2006).

In November 1978 McDiarmid held a joint exhibition with another Australian artist, Peter Tully, at Hogarth Galleries in Sydney. Tully and McDiarmid, whilst also being romantic partners, had previously collaborated on works of art and exhibitions. For this show McDiarmid produced a series of works known as the Trade Enquiries collages, several of which were produced as offset lithographs for wider circulation in the following year. Following this show he exhibited Trade Enquiries again at Hogarth Galleries and produced an accompanying series of large-scale collage works, examining the effect on Australia of the 'Macho' look and the new power of the 'pink' dollar (Coppell 2011).

Fourteen of these large scale collaged works are now being treated at the NGV prior to an extensive retrospective show of McDiarmid's work slated for exhibition in 2014. These works have been kindly donated to the Gallery by Dr. Sally Gray, executor of his estate and copyright holder and curator of McDiarmid's artistic legacy, on the proviso that they receive much needed conservation treatment prior to display.

WORKS & MATERIALS

The examples of materials found within McDiarmid's portfolio of work are wide and varied, and range from paintings in gouache and acrylic on paper, canvas and cloth, drawings in watercolour, graphite and coloured pencil, collage, found objects including linoleum flooring, photographs, cut tile, fabric samples and holographic Mylar, offset printed works on paper and laser prints (Gray 2006, p.23). McDiarmid's varied use of materials ensured the artist's work eschewed the label of 'painter or 'sculptor', and this rejection of tradition resonates through his work. He further utilised this notion by incorporating visual material from advertising, comic strips, fan magazines, commercial graphics, gay male pornography, street art, newspaper headlines and promotional material for underground dance clubs (Gray 2006, p.23).

The fourteen large-scale collaged works are an excellent example of this kind of multi-faceted artistic palette. All of these delicate works are comprised of a medium sized sheet of handmade mulberry paper, featuring ephemeral elements ranging from small holographic buttons, photographic material, fabric swatches and mixed paper materials such as Hollywood star maps, Xerox photocopies, confetti and food wrappers. The condition of this group of works was extremely poor due to the nature of the materials used at the time of manufacture, as well as contributing factors such as environmental exposure and inadequate storage. All of the work contained elements that were in a partial state, if not a complete state, of delamination, and some were so delaminated that there were no original elements of the collage attached to the substrate. Throughout all of the works there was heavily encrusted yellow staining on the substrate, which appeared to be a result of the original adhesive McDiarmid had used and this staining had penetrated nearly all of the pieces of collaged ephemera that it was in contact with, obscuring the detail on many items.



Figure 1. David McDIARMID Australia 1952–95, lived in United States 1979–87. *Identikit crisis*, 1978, collage of embossed plastic, paper ephemera, cotton fabric, ink on mulberry paper, 62.5cm X 50.5cm (irregular edges)

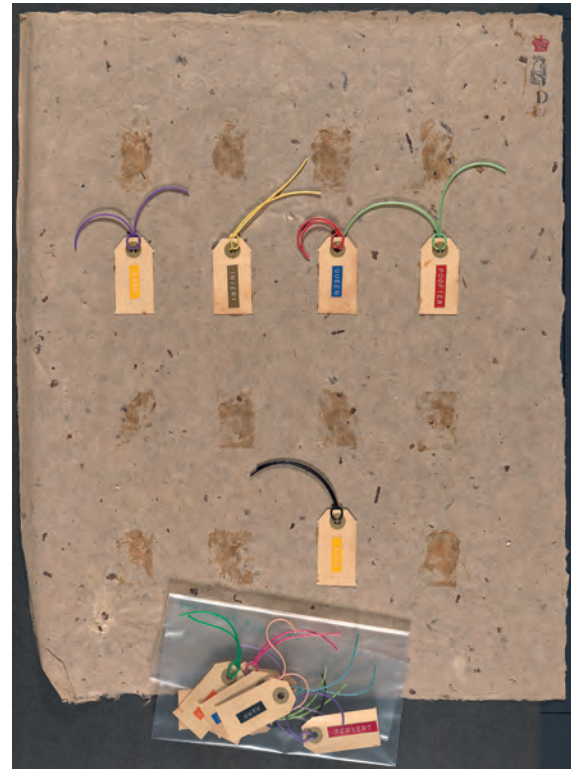


Figure 2. David McDIARMID Australia 1952–95, lived in United States 1979–87. *Labels*, 1978, collage of embossed plastic, paper ephemera, plastic tubing, ink on mulberry paper, 62.5cm X 50.5cm (irregular edges)

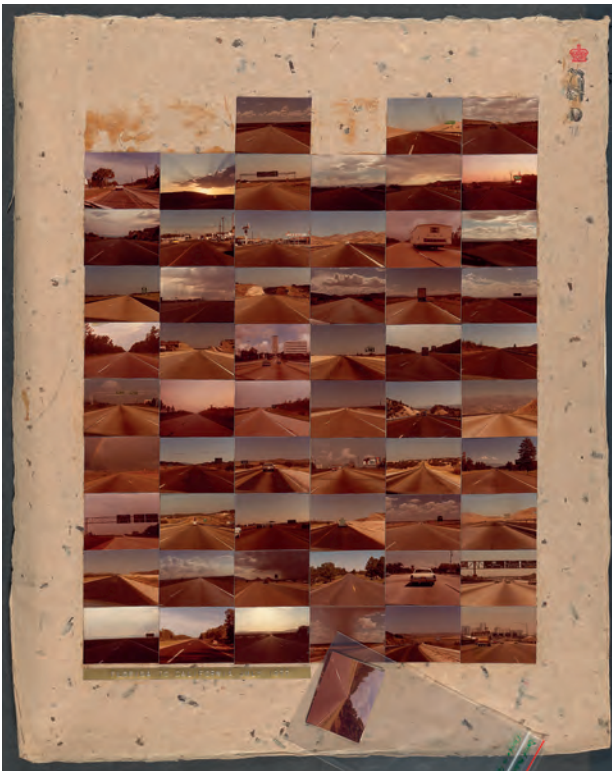


Figure 3. David McDIARMID Australia 1952–95, lived in United States 1979–87 *Florida to California*, 1978, collage of type C photographs and ink on mulberry paper, 62.5cm X 50.5cm (irregular edges)

MATERIAL DETERIORATION & ETHICAL CONCERNS

A major issue associated with this treatment was the collaged elements that had become lost during the passage of time. Many of the works were without several original elements, which created a prohibitively jarring and distracting visual effect to the work. One particular work entitled '*Identikit Crisis*' (Figure 1) was comprised of many different Xerox®-copied elements of illustrations of facial parts - such as noses, eyes and ears – and many of these pieces were no longer present on the work, now merely represented by a yellow stain. In order for the conceptual message of this work to be fully represented, the work relies upon the presence of these collaged elements, and without them the work lost its impact and effect. While the ageing and deterioration of this work also has a place within the story of its historical life, the evaluation of whether or not this was more inherently valuable than the artists' meaning and impetus was considered by the conservator throughout the treatment.

Another work entitled '*Labels*' (Figure 2) features twelve small identification labels which each have a single word printed with a Dymo® labeller adhered to the centre of the label. There is also a small piece of plastic tubing tied through the pre-punctured hole in the upper section of the label, mimicking the appearance of a museum identification label. The majority of the labels had fully delaminated from the substrate, or were in a state of delamination, and three of the original labels were completely missing from the work.

Another work entitled '*Florida to California*' (Figure 3) features sixty small chromogenic photographs adhered to the same mulberry substrate. Three of these photographs had fully

delaminated and the mulberry substrate was severely yellowed and encrusted with old adhesive. The verso of the three loose photographs presented heavy yellowed adhesive staining, which in some cases had penetrated to the emulsion of the photograph. The majority of the remaining photographs were in a state of delamination and very loosely attached to the substrate, which had been significantly weakened by the adhesive.

To treat these art works, extensive discussion was conducted with Dr. Gray as well as my fellow paper conservators; Ruth Shervington, Louise Wilson and conservator of photographs, Pip Morrison. Dr. Gray was a tremendous aid in determining the extent of intervention that was appropriate for these works, as not only being the executor of McDiarmid's estate; she was also a close personal friend of the artist. In discussing potential treatments for the work, Dr. Gray provided a crucial perspective and was ultimately extremely supportive of a more interventive approach to ensure the message of these works was conserved as well as the materials.

TREATMENT

It was decided that for some of the works which had suffered major losses of material information that some of the lost ephemera would be recreated using modern materials to fill this loss. For works such as *Labels*, the three missing labels would be recreated, and for *Identi-Kit Crisis* missing pieces of the collaged elements would be attempted to be recreated. In the case of *Florida to California* no photographs were missing, however a more in-depth conservation treatment would be done to prevent further deterioration and to stabilise the work.

The decision to recreate components was only chosen for works where there was photographic evidence of the original work at the time of exhibition, and this documentation was used as a reference for placement and creation. Problems arose when an original photograph could not be sourced or the photograph was of poor quality and the finer details of the collage work could not be accurately identified. This problem became clear for the piece 'Labels', which had no reference material, and it was not possible to determine the specific text for each of the three missing labels.

After discussing with Dr. Gray, it was decided that it would be suitable to use the original *Trade Enquiries* artworks as a reference point for recreating the three missing labels on the work, *Labels*. These original works are very similar to the collage work, and there is one particular work that displays a sheet of labels featuring one-word adjectives, much in the same fashion of *Labels*. All of the words that appear on the collage work also appear on the *Trade Enquiries* work, yet there are several more words on this work that are not present on the collage piece. Using this older artwork as a reference guide, and after discussing the choice of words with my fellow conservators, the newly selected three words were "Faggot," "Fairy" and "Sodomite" (Figure 4). These particular words were selected due to their association and significance within the history of gay culture, as well as the labels that immediately surrounded them (Figure 6).



Figure 4. Detail of three Dymo® labels re-created for artwork *Labels* Photographed by S. Brown



Figure 5. Detail of tubing attempting to be coated. Photographed by S. Brown

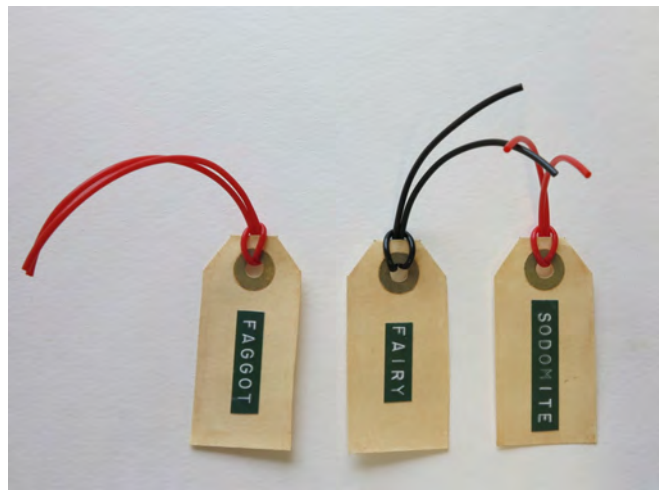


Figure 6. Detail of three museum labels being re-created for artwork *Labels*. Photographed by S. Brown

The plastic tubing sourced for the replacement labels was located after discussing options with objects conservator, Dianne Whittle. A selection of tubing was sourced from an online craft supply retailer, and tubing with a similar width, colour and flexibility was chosen in two different colours. Prior to introducing this new material an attempt to create a completely archival replacement was conducted, on the advice of exhibitions conservator, Helen Casey. Ms Casey provided a sample of surgical tubing with a suggestion of coating it to match the colours of the existing tubing (Figure 5). Several attempts to coat this tubing failed due to the nature of the material, so the purchased tubing was incorporated after coating the surface with a protective barrier of gelatin.

As '*Identi-Kit Crisis*' is mainly comprised of multiple copies of the same images within the collage, and there was an existing photograph of the work at the time of exhibition, it was decided that these missing elements could be attempted to be recreated using modern techniques and the existing collage pieces that were delaminated. With the help of the photographic services team, copies were made of the original delaminated collage pieces. These copies were photocopied several times to try to recreate a similar tonal and textural

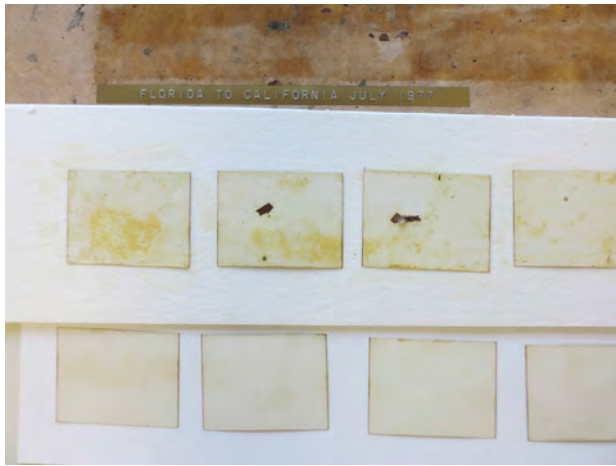


Figure 7. Detail of photographs viewed from verso from artwork *Florida to California*. Photographed by S. Brown



Figure 8. After treatment of artwork *Florida to California*. Photographed by S. Brown

appearance to the existing collaged elements. Another concern arose when conducting this treatment in the form of the adhesive staining, and whether or not this should also be recreated to best match the original material. As the adhesive staining is an example of the age of the work, and an indicator of the material composition, the staining is an important part of these pieces. However, these treatments are not attempting to disguise the fact that the work has suffered losses or changes, but instead ease the disruption to the overall appearance and thus the message the artist intended. Therefore it was considered that staining should not be added to the recreated pieces to act as a gentle reminder that these new pieces are not original. At the time of publication this work is still undergoing treatment so a complete analysis of this methodology is unable to be provided.

The sixty small hand-cut chromogenic photographs featured in *Florida to California* were all present with the substrate; however three of the photos had fully delaminated (Figure 3). When examining these photographs the extent of the adhesive staining was revealed as there was heavily encrusted yellow residue on the verso of all pieces. The exposed substrate where these images had lain also revealed heavy adhesive staining, which appeared to have weakened the mulberry paper. After consulting with Pip Morrison to devise a suitable approach for treatment, spot testing was conducted and a 100% solution of ETOH Ethanol was used in conjunction with cotton swabs to clear the verso of the photograph (Figure 7). 100% ETOH was also applied with a brush and blotted from the substrate where the staining was present, which significantly reduced the staining. This methodology worked so efficiently that in order to provide stability and reduce the rate of deterioration, all of the individual photographs were removed, swab cleaned and the substrate cleared using the original application, and then the photograph re-adhered to the substrate. The photographs were all in a partial state of delamination at the time, which allowed for a straightforward removal using a septum elevator, and once cleared of the adhesive residue were re-adhered using Lascaux® 498. Lascaux® was chosen as an adhesive to provide a strong bond between the resin coated paper of the photograph and the fibrous mulberry paper, with minimal moisture (Figure 8).

CONCLUSION

Despite conducting the treatment on these artworks alone, these treatments – which are still ongoing - could not have moved forward without constant advice, reassessment and evaluation with my fellow conservators within the National Gallery of Victoria's conservation department and this treatment is an excellent example of conservation working as a collaborative exercise. The treatments conducted thus far have been ultimately successful in providing more stability to the fragile works as well as allowing the artist's message to be maintained. Despite the invasiveness of these treatments the long-term benefits for exhibition, storage and access supported the decision develop this treatment methodology. By opening the forum for discussion when conducting an ethically complex treatment, the opportunity is presented to explore a varied realm of ideas and possibilities, which may not have been considered by the individual conservator working autonomously. Different skill sets and knowledge provided a vital aid in conducting these treatments and without these discussions the treatment would not have been as successful as intended, and the concept and intention of the artwork may have been lost.

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MATERIALS

Plastic Tubing

MIY Arts and Crafts Pty. Ltd.
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Email:enquiry@miyartcrafts.com.au

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Sarah Brown is a freelance conservator who graduated from the Masters program at the University of Melbourne in 2011, majoring in paper conservation with a focus on photographs. Sarah has worked for the National Gallery of Victoria as a Conservator of Paper and Photographs, and undertook her internship at the National Gallery of Australia.

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