

Jasper Jacobsen  
*Agnosia*

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## **Towards an inventory of the familiar, the phantom and the foreign**

Jasper Jacobsen  
*Agnosia*  
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Text by Dan Rule

I am nine years old and I am in bed. It is early morning and I am lying on my side with my eyes closed. It is 1989. I can hear my sister's breathing – protracted and steady, still in the grips of sleep – from her bed on the other side of the room. We are staying at our grandparents' house in Pambula, on the South Coast of New South Wales.

I open my eyes and they immediately fall on my grandfather's old clock radio, which rests on my bedside table. It is pre-digital and the printed numbers change via a nimble flipping mechanism. It has a wood-grain finish. The morning light is soft in the room and the clock reads 6.17am.

A scattering of objects – petite, inconspicuous and exacting in their arrangement – line a long, slender shelf. At a glance, at least, we have no reason to be circumspect. In passing, the ledge holds

little more than old knickknacks: an hourglass, a couple of small glass vials, an old brass bell, a pair of scissors, a rock, and so on.

It is a quietly handsome little collection. The objects' individual and mutual scales are unobtrusive and contained. Not unlike our experience of the antique store, the op-shop or the museum, the scene – and the objects that render it – emanates a kind of embedded aestheticism. Objects, tools, keepsakes, photographs and other historical remnants – *things* – are hardly blank or mute. They suggest, they reveal and they divulge. Things are carriers.

My grandfather had died a year earlier in 1988. It was pancreatic cancer and he was gone within months of diagnosis. He was a stern, precise man, but he was warm too. We had often played cricket on the beach together, and I remember him feigning great interest at my childish feats in “beach Olympics”.

In the year after he died, my grandmother gave me his clock to use whenever I stayed with her. It was a way to still feel close, connected somehow. He had watched that clock every night before sleep and every morning after, and now I would too.

With proximity, the stability of this odd little taxonomy begins to falter and quake. Each step closer reveals a rupture. The “objectness” of these articles is compromised. There is good reason the objects that populate the exhibition *Agnosia* are often referred to as “assisted readymades”. The interventions that animate these objects are at once delicate and decisive in their gestural, allegorical and associative weight. The term “agnosia” refers to an inability to process different forms of sensory information and cues – a state often

brought about by neurological trauma – and not unlike this premise, these familiar objects are also adrift.

Both topmost and bottommost orbs of Jacobsen's hourglass, titled *As the Palsied Universe Lies Before Us* are filled with sand, effectively halting and stymieing the passage of time, as only death can. Other works assume such elliptical registers. *The End is the Beginning is the End* sees two battered retractable tape measures connected by the same tape. Stuck in a kind of perpetual faceoff, they measure each other and nothing all at once – their customary functionality sidelined for a perpetually futile skirmish. Likewise, *Cabal* sees two antiquated Bakelite receivers connected by the one, singular cord. Like its title, the work portends to an unswervingly direct, unmediated and clandestine circuit – a kind of psychic feedback loop. The work *Erebus* (whose title refers to the Greek primordial deity of deep, unknowable darkness), meanwhile, comprises a vintage mantel clock, its face and mechanism removed to reveal nothing but a yawning central cavity, painted in a light-deadening highly pigmented black. Our understanding and perception of time is swallowed whole, suspended in darkness.

In any case, Jacobsen's allegorical, metonymical and referential impulses invite rather than resist. He is unselfconscious in his offering of cues, hooks and gestures.

My grandfather was a retired dentist and used his newfound time and natural technical acumen to master carpentry, cabinetmaking and basic engineering. He meticulously designed and built two caravans, and later poured his energy into his biggest project of all – the house at Pambula.





Image by Susie Blake

While he had builders construct the basic brick structure, he used his burgeoning carpentry skillset to fit-out the entirety of the house's interior: the kitchen; the modernist timber cabinetry; the plastering; the particleboard ceiling in our bedroom, which my sister and I would stare at from bed, searching out and identifying abstract arrangements of woodchips in the guise of animals, goblins and human faces.

While thematic threads circulate here that might otherwise seem morose, Jacobsen's precise visual wit prevails. There is a melancholic comfort to these objects, which appear to have been hijacked by strange existential forces. *The Lost, the Forgotten* comprises two small glass vials containing gold and silver coloured metal shavings respectively. That the larger collection is actually a pulverised padlock, and the smaller its former key, offers the allegorical kicker: once intrinsic to each other, these activators are now forever astray.

The framed work *Doorway (Mourning and Melancholia)* – sub-titled after Sigmund Freud's 1917 psychoanalytic essay – assumes the form of a black minimalist monochrome. Yet, at the margins, we can make out faint letters and texts, ghosting in and out of the black. That the work was made through gradual accretion, by photocopying each successive page of Freud's work onto the same single A4 sheet, offers new layers of understanding. The text is not only addressing – but now also corralling – us toward the chasm of mortality.

My grandparents were only able to enjoy the house together for a few years before he died. But his presence was written throughout the building. He was in the materials and the fixtures and the appliances. He was in the floor plan, the



the staircases and the spatial reasoning. The house was a threshold.

Other objects and materials are subjected to uncanny, almost humorous fates. A cotton doily breaks into glass-like shards in *The Fall*; in *Slain Slayer* an unidentified force has scythed clean through the blades of a pair of scissors – as if they'd somehow turned on themselves – rendering them dismembered, their utility void forevermore; an antique handbell is left forever silent – like its Ancient Greek namesake – by its elongated donger, in *Harpocrates' Scream*; in *Eyes of the Oracle* a pair of dice lie blank and inert; and a scattering of schoolboard chalk lies ironically trapped in a shell of chalkboard paint in *Eclipse*.

Some of Jacobsen's most poignant works stare death directly in the eye. Taking its title from the favourite Slayer album of his youth, *Seasons in the Abyss* sees vintage photographic portraits stoically submerging into the surface on which they stand, as if passing into the next realm. There is both pain and comfort to *The River*, an imposing series of framed photographs, arranged so as to conjoin snaking cracks in gravestones until they form a stream. There is unlikely communion in our final end.

It is 6.17am and I am studying the clock. I rub my eyes, roll onto my back, and open them again to see my grandfather. He is standing at the foot of my bed, quietly looking over us. I close my eyes again.

Later that morning, I tell my grandmother about it. She smiles gently and is quiet for a time. She says that she has seen him too.

One might point to the visual/linguistic and philosophical witticisms of British artist Ryan Gander in appraising these works. He offers a similar clarity of device in his likeminded ploys to de-familiarise and reposition our understanding of everyday objects. But Jacobsen's active engagement with history, philosophy, psychology and mythology, and his sensitivity to objects in relation to deep time, position his works in a realm closer to that of the Dutch sculptor Mark Manders or the Swiss photo artist Batia Suter.

The fact that many of the objects that feature in *Agnosia* belonged to Jacobsen's late grandparents (with remaining objects specifically sourced from deceased estates) seems to speak to the quiet candour of his endeavour. Here, he enacts a kind of psychic and personal archaeology of things. A post-mortem of what's left behind.

The four works that populate the series *Bouquet* (*Cherry Blossom, Lotus, Lily, Tulip*) are effectively blank, paper monochromes. That each was once an origami flower – later unfolded, then humidified and flattened by a paper conservator back to its original state – speaks volumes. As with the rest of *Agnosia*, the subjectivities of erasure and counter-narrative are all good and well. But our presence remains embedded in surfaces, things and objects. We are residue.



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