



## The Hyperreal World of Susan Collis



Susan Collis in her studio on the outskirts of London, where she transforms the everyday into the extraordinary.

By Coline Milliard  
Published: February 1, 2010

The artist selected to create the Armory Show's visual identity talks to Modern Painters about her latest artistic direction.

"I've always wanted a creative life," says Susan Collis. "But being an artist wasn't something that I'd ever, ever planned." In a world too often privileging the young and emerging, Collis's artistic journey stands out. She left a successful career in publishing to start her training at London's Chelsea College of Art and Design, later continuing at the Royal College of Art (RCA). "I met my husband when I was in my 30s," she confides. "He's an experimental filmmaker, and I think it was he who really introduced me to the idea of 'making.'"

"Making," for Collis, means drawing attention to the craft behind the art, and it is crucial to her practice. Often her pieces are at first hard to discern. For her breakthrough 2007 exhibition, "Don't Get Your Hopes Up," her London gallery, Seventeen, seemed vacant, as if it were being prepared for the next show. Drips of paint stained the wooden floor, screw holes awaited filler, and a soiled broom leaned casually against the wall. Yet in this under-whelming mess, treasures awarded closer inspection: The Rawlplugs were made of precious stones, and the paint spatters turned out to be rounds of mother-of-pearl delicately set in the floorboards like gems in an engagement ring. Each discovery was a little epiphany. Viewers stopped being outsiders looking at art and became associates in the know, intimately linked to the artist by a shared secret.

Like what you see? Sign up for ARTINFO's weekly newsletter to get the latest on the market, emerging artists, auctions, galleries, museums, and more.

Collis has been creating these thrilling moments of revelation since graduating from the RCA, in 2002. They are the by-product of her dedication to celebrating the unnoticed. "At the very beginning, I was trying to make work that was quite invisible. It was very sitespecific. It was when I was at college, doing my MA, and I was looking at the sorts of things that you would walk by and ignore—studio furniture and equipment, things like that."

# lora reynolds gallery

As in most of her earlier works, the hallmarked gold screws dotting the walls of “Don’t Get Your Hopes Up” intentionally drew attention to the behind-the-scenes of art and exhibition making. “Production is art’s dirty secret,” Collis says. “What I’m mainly concerned with is the background to display, all the stuff that goes on to facilitate the display of everything.”

It may sound as if her main goal were to lay bare art’s illusions. But Collis’s pieces mystify the creative process as much as they deconstruct it. Works such as *Long Gone* (2007), with its neat alignment of turquoise and smoky-topaz Rawlplugs, and *Made Good* (2007), a hallmarked 18-carat white-gold screw set in coral, evoke fictional situations, posing as the leftovers of an exhibition that never took place and alluding to the labor of technicians who’ve never entered the gallery. The ghostly artworks that once supposedly crowded the empty walls hover above her own creations.

The glamour of the materials that Collis employs has often obscured their actual *raison d’être*. “I really wanted my first show to look as if it was totally empty,” she says. “I thought, ‘How can I find a material which is so opposite to this?’” For Collis, using gold and diamonds is a way of interlocking contrasting concepts: precious and worthless, elaborate and casual, full and void. “At college I was really looking at artists who tried to dematerialize their practice, like Gordon Matta-Clark and Daniel Spoerri,” she recalls. “It’s funny to think that now, because I’ve ended up having such a material practice.” Collis’s highly desirable (and collectable) pieces paradoxically function as antidotes to the spectacularism that has defined a large part of art production in the past two decades.

“The early works started out with embroidery and drawing. They weren’t precious so much, except that they had a lot of time spent on them,” she says, recalling her very first illusionistic piece, executed during her MA studies at the RCA, composed of two embroidered boiler suits seemingly blotted with paint. “I was going to paint them both. But at the time I was thinking about this whole idea of truth to the material, and I thought that it would be really nice if the marks could be thread, like the fabric of the suits.” Lacking any craft skills, she started stitching and experimenting with *trompe l’oeil*. “When I took the boiler suits to the crit,” she continues, “it was really funny, because nobody knew what I was talking about. We had to stop, and everybody went to have a look at them. I realized I was onto something.”

Perhaps to distance herself from the solipsism that threatens any self-reflexive practice, Collis has recently moved from art-related detritus to scraps from building sites. “Sue’s practice has always been very broad, but people tend to focus only on certain types of works,” complains her dealer, Dave Hoyland.

Unlike the freshwater-pearl-adorned broom *Waltzer* (2007), in which she added elements to an existing object, Collis’s current pieces replicate anonymous bits of timber using rare woods and precious pigments. In her studio there is tracing paper everywhere; each stain is faithfully reproduced. “The accidental is really hard to invent,” she explains. “It’s much more efficient to copy a real drip of paint to create the illusion.” These are no *trompe l’oeils*, though; their “fakeness” is offered up. “For me it’s a really exciting departure, because the finished objects have more of a hyperreal look,” says Collis. If her barely noticeable gold screws quietly exalted the overlooked, then this new body of works elevates the mundane.

“The Hyperreal World of Susan Collis” originally appeared in the February 2010 issue of *Modern*

*Painters*. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see *Modern Painters*’