

## DARREN KNIGHT GALLERY

JENNIFER MILLS

In the echo chamber

*If I were you I would do more listening than talking*

Aug 23- Sept 20 2014

### The 'Susan Hilton Moment': slipping between chaos and control

*"What gun? This isn't a gun, this is my nephew's rubber duck!"*

*Maxwell Smart<sup>1</sup>*

In Series 3, Episode 19 of the 1960's spy genre spoof *Get Smart*, Secret Agent 99 resolves to leave the spy agency that she works for to marry a wealthy casino owner from *île Saint Germaine*. At one point her real name, Susan Hilton is revealed. It's a big moment in the series for we know her only as Agent 99, and even her partner Agent 86, Maxwell Smart, is shocked: "I've worked with you for five years and you've never told me your name" he exclaims. "You've never asked" she replies.

Except that Susan Hilton isn't Agent 99's name, it's a fictitious identity. The 'Susan Hilton Moment', which could be described as the simultaneous promise *and* denial of truth, may imply the conditional nature of reality, but more so it serves as a gentle reminder that perhaps things do not necessarily unfold as expected. Our ability to control our



*In the echo chamber (Susan Hilton isn't my real name) watercolour and ink on paper 2014*

own destinies is in fact limited. Random and unpredictable occurrences play a large part in shaping our lives and forming who we are. Within Agent 99's decision to change her life, to become Susan Hilton, we can identify a known impulse towards fantasy; if only becoming someone else were as easy as changing your name.

Jennifer Mills is a big fan of *Get Smart*. She grew up wanting to be Agent 99, her beloved cats were named Hymie and Octavia after the two robots who fall in love in Season 2, Episode 46 *It Takes One To Know One*, and she pre-ordered the entire series on DVD from the US years before they were available to purchase here in Australia. Many of the drawings in her current exhibition *In The Echo Chamber* are stills from *Get Smart* episodes and not surprisingly the 'Susan Hilton Moment' is amongst them.

*The Groovy Guru*, another key episode for Mills appears in various forms throughout this exhibition. The plot involves Max and 99 capturing an evil guru who is hypnotising teenagers into committing crimes through mind altering pop music. At one point the duo must escape from a sound booth in the groovy Guru's recording studio. Trapped inside the recording studio's 'echo chamber' Max and 99 must avoid making even the slightest noise as the decibel level inside the room has been magnified to such an extent that even a pin dropping would be loud enough to kill.

"If I were you" says the groovy guru, "I'd do more listening than talking".

This is a sentence that resonates with Mills as her youngest son's autism means that for the child the noise of the world is a cacophony of overlapped and interwoven sounds from which he is unable to filter out background noise. Rather, as a coping mechanism, he puts his fingers into his ears in order to lesson his sensitivity to sound, thereby creating order out of the discordant 'echo chamber' inside his head. The reverberating text on Mills' drawings is not only a visual metaphor for the sounds inside our minds, but also references the famous 1960's 'wall of sound' developed by Phil Spector and used on such iconic 60's albums as The Beatles, *Let It Be*. Spector's 'wall of sound' involved a recording method by which already recorded music was played and re-recorded inside an echo chamber, creating a distinctive and dense layering of sound. It is hard not to see the Groovy Guru's use of the wall of sound as a weapon that in some way foreshadows the insane story of Phil Spector's life, which was to seemingly move into a complete separation from reality. 'I think I might have killed someone', he said on the night of Lana Clarkson's murder<sup>2</sup>.

Listening and talking are fundamentals of human interaction, and the guru's attempt to 'silence' Max and 99 cleverly puns on the power structures of speech. It is one thing to be able to listen, for this implies humility and in turn wisdom, but quite another to be disavowed of voice. Speech and silence have been reviewed most heavily in terms of gender and western male power, where historical links to the denial of a female (minority) voice have resulted in asymmetrical power relationships<sup>3</sup>. However it is important to note that silence when chosen, also offers the possibility of empowerment in the form of subversion. Refusing to echo dominant forms of speech is the cornerstone of modern democracy. The repetitive urgency in Mills' scribbling of the sentence "If I were you I'd do more listening than talking" is redolent not only of living inside the echo chamber, but of systemic attempts to

drown out the voices of individuals who do not neatly fit. The narrative point in the plot which finds Max and 99 locked inside the echo chamber is worth noting as it inverts the well known spy trope of capture and interrogation, as rather than confess their knowledge in order to live, Max and 99 must remain mute. In the instance of confession given under coercion the power of speech is also reversed, with speech used as a weapon against the speaker, as in this situation it is the listener who holds judiciary power.<sup>4</sup>



*In the echo chamber (Phil Spector) watercolour and pencil on paper 2014*

Mel Brooks, the comedian and writer of *Get Smart*, wittily chose the names KAOS and CONTROL for his two opposing cold-war spy agencies. Despite their oppositional roles as representing good and evil the secret agents of both CONTROL and KAOS actually had many characteristics in common, such as a unionised work force and a love of dancing<sup>5</sup>. The interdependency of chaos and control in fact goes back to pre-Christian mythology when chaos described the formlessness of non-existence. From the void of nothing, or chaos, sprang forth a *something* - a being - and the system required to give it shape is control. The great and ongoing battle between chaos and control defines our human existence; it has accompanied us out of the abyss of pre-history to the present day. Chaos and control must remain in equilibrium in order for the world to prosper. Without control there is chaos and

without chaos there is no need for control. The fact that CONTROL's top operative is, in the words of Mel Brooks, an idiot, forms the profoundly comedic paradox of *Get Smart*<sup>6</sup>.

Any system, which is able to be determined in advance, is said to be 'chaotic' when the evolution of the system depends on the system's initial conditions, suggesting that two trajectories originating from the same point, subject to the same set of predictions will ultimately diverge<sup>7</sup>. The impact of random actions upon a predetermined sequence underpins the basis of chaos theory in which predictable or orderly occurrences will ultimately lose their controlling mechanism and become chaotic. The children in Mills' drawing *In the echo chamber* (*Grade 4, 1976: 31 colours*) stare out at the photographer obediently, for this is their official School photo. Beyond the nostalgia of flares and checked shirts we see that in this image a divergent group of people were at one point united through the random control of geography. Annotations made to the drawing by Mills attempt to indicate details of these children as individuals, trying to extend their identity beyond a photographic representation.



*In the echo chamber* (*Grade 4, 1976: 31 colours*) watercolour, gouache, ink and pencil on paper 2013

But memory is fickle and for many of the children there is little to recall. Susan Sontag points out to us that the family photograph is as much a helpful tool in forgetting as it is in remembering<sup>8</sup>. Every memory that is triggered by a photograph in a family album aids in the erasure of one that has not been recorded. Photography therefore becomes a powerful memory-shaping tool, helping us to forge a version of the past that is agreeable. Mills however approaches her family photographs more like an archivist and confesses that she has not looked at them very much until she recently asked her mother if she knew where they were. The fact that they sit so well with the other drawings in *In The Echo Chamber* could be explained by the arbitrary, three-dimensionality of chaos theory. Given that chaos theory recognises linkages between seemingly disconnected actions we may be able to make sense of the strangely interwoven nature of Mills' influences.



In the echo chamber (mosquito) watercolour, gouache, ink, oil pastel and pencil on paper 2014

If time can be considered a chaotic shape in which the existence of outwardly discordant components can be linked by Mills' personal history, we can find a connection between the children on the motorbike (who are actually Mills and her siblings) in the 70's snapshot, the 'groovy guru' in the Get Smart episode, Max and 99's echo chamber, Phil Spector and Agent 99's false claim to be Susan Hilton. Mills' son Darcy is the thread that links it all.



In the echo chamber (Billy's bike) watercolour, gouache, ink and pencil on paper 2014

Living with a child who finds sounds overwhelming must make you wonder what are noises like for him? Is it like Phil Spectres' wall of sound; is it the echo chamber in *Get Smart*? I guess its no surprise that Mills followed the recent Spector court case with intense curiosity. It is the height of irony that a man touted as a genius, who developed a new and enduring way of encountering sound should end up so disconnected from reality that he cannot seem to comprehend the gravity of a murder trial.

There is a comfort in the concept of a controlled system. It implies total understanding without room for deviation. It implies knowing the parameters of your terrain. We know when we watch *Get Smart* that nothing bad will happen to Max and 99, that Max's bumbling incompetence and 99's quick wittedness will see control win over chaos. How amazing if life were that simple. Just what unpredictable influences shifted the course of the lives of the girls who were, at one still-point in time, part of the same netball team, we can't know. What did happen to the children in the birthday party photo? Interestingly in recent years scientists have observed that chaotic systems have the potential to correct themselves, regaining control. In order to do so chaos enters into a *feedback* loop that given enough time will correct itself, returning to its previously predictable pattern. Throughout all 138 episodes of *Get Smart* we never discover Agent 99's real name; the narrative doesn't require it, and we don't mind, because after the uncertainty of the 'Susan Hilton Moment' the story returns, and things play out, more or less in control.

Julia Powles, 2014

Julia Powles is an artist and curator living in Melbourne. Recent projects have included *My Father was a Rock Star*, exhibited as part of a 12-month examination of contemporary painting practice in *Incidents Above a Bar*, and in 2013 she hosted the 6-month artist residency program *My House Is Too Small* inside her apartment. In May 2013 Julia invited Jennifer Mills to participate in the curated exhibition *The Past is Perfect*, a project examining photography, personal history and false memory syndrome. Contact: [juliafpowles@gmail.com](mailto:juliafpowles@gmail.com)

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Brooks, M., & Henry, B., *Get Smart*, Season 3, Episode, 75, 'The Groovy Guru'. Max has mistakenly taken a 'lie' pill and when asked about the gun in his hand made the above response.

<sup>2</sup> Glaister, D., *How Phil Spector was convicted of the murder of Lana Clarkson*, The Guardian, Tuesday 14 April, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, J., *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of identity*, Routledge, New York and London, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, M., *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews & Other Interviews 1972-1977*. Pantheon Books, 1980. p. 61 -62.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Brooks, M., & Henry, B., *Get Smart*, Season 2, Episode 39, 'Rub-A-Dub-Dub... Three Spies in a Sub', where Kreuger, second in charge for KAOS refuses to mutiny his men, as it would mean missing the upcoming KAOS dance.

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, *Smart Money*, Time. October 15, 1965. Accessed 16/07/2014: <http://content.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,834525,00.html>

<sup>7</sup> Boccaletti, S., et al. *The Control of Chaos: Theory and Applications*, Physics Reports 329, Elsevier Science, 2000. p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Sontag, S., *On Photography*, Anchor Books, New York 1990