

At Home with Painting, Curated by Madeleine Kelly
SCA Gallery, Sydney College of the Arts
Thursday 7 March – Saturday 20 April 2024

Artists: Hany Armanious, Amber Boardman, Angela Brennan, Diena Georgetti, Alex Gawronski, Newell Harry, Madeleine Kelly, Spencer Lai, Archie Moore, Jahnne Pasco-White, Lisa Radford, Tim Schultz, Jelena Telecki and Rex Veal.

This exhibition explores the myriad ways of being at home with painting. Are we at home with the act of 'painting' (the verb), in the company of 'Painting' (the noun) or even constructing a kind of psychological 'home' through painting? Why are home and painting so emblematic of our struggles?

Painting, like home, occupies a unique position in our individual and collective psyches—as verb or noun—the promise of familiarity and comfort but perhaps too, lingering in its textures, the strange and uncanny, or even discomfort and threat. Painting can be good company too.

We often think of painting as a mirror to life, reflecting patterns, surfaces, and objects that we encounter in our everyday and domestic spaces, evoking a sense of familiarity and nostalgia, perhaps through déjà vu. A white-painted surface, too, can foreshadow the psychoanalytic world: a blank space for projection can provide entry into the subconscious, while a primed canvas can mean a fresh start, a way out of a habit.

More, we often keep paintings at home, we display them in unconventional spaces, exhibiting them 'underground', outside the system, blurring the boundaries between homes and galleries. Both homes and paintings can be sites of violence and abuse, sites of care and connection, or simply spaces to take refuge or risks and resolve individual and interpersonal conflicts, reminding us of the complexities of these environments. Recently, we are reminded that neither homes nor paintings can be taken for granted.

Then again, to be at home with painting is to explore it with confidence, pushing the limits of painting as a pictorial subject, to deceive the eye and create paradoxical effects. We often paint on readymade supports found at home, or directly onto walls and surfaces, challenging the value of tradition. Taking on a life of its own, it can possess personhood and exist within a neighbourhood of interstitial spaces. Our confidence and familiarity with painting often begins at a very young age, we are encouraged to explore and experiment with finger painting, to feel the colours and textures long before we develop skills necessary to hold and manipulate an implement.

There is no denying that painting is still at the forefront of contemporary art. While our minds are attuned to a post-medium world, as any student knows, the lure of the liquid medium and brush sustains. As any lecturer knows, students feel at home with painting, often dwelling with it, or destroying it, only to return to it in some other way.

Perhaps that is why it is worth returning home, where so much painting takes place. To be at home with painting is to explore its crystalline dimensions—as something familiar, cosy and homely but also through the psychoanalytic term 'uncanny' (or unheimlich, unhomely). These artists do just that.

Spencer Lai creates intriguing 'paintings' with uncanny objects and materials. His 'pen' reminds us of what a painter really does in the studio—the objects we collect, the mess, the ideas, the experiments—all contained within the pen of abundant planes and objects. Some objects suggest alchemical transformation. Others suggest a sensitivity to surface, of paint as strata, paint as sap or lacquer, or paint as a bruised and scratched diaphanous plane. A scale model home sits within the pen. The house—the universal symbol of habitation, existence and the mind—surrenders to the playful charge of the enclosure. In dreams of houses we discover extra rooms to be filled. The pen is like a dream too, full of fragments: Does the miniature monochrome carving tell us a story from inside the void? Can the ruin of the crazed art deco figurehead guide us through this field? Or, as **Rex Veal's** text suggests, the dolls could be key—like a white canvas that foreshadows one's existence, the resin dolls' blank surfaces provide entry into the mirror phase, a way for the traumatised to re-enter language.

In **Jelena Telecki's** figurative paintings we can recognise and affirm an ideal of home as a space both of mutuality and fighting, of love and its risks and struggles, of caring and conflictual connections to others. In *Interior 2*, the tiptoe of a high-heeled figure presses teasingly on a fragile vase that, due to its horizontal alignment and dark opening, evokes an alimentary drive. In turn, the vase sprouts a bunch of black-centred flowers, voids that constitute exits or entries into sexualised anthropomorphic flowers. Telecki's paintings are often tight skins of membranous forms under tension, where the brush imparts the sympathetic illusion of touching or caressing a body that is

somewhat out of bounds. Forms emerge sfumato-like out of grey grounds and the viewer is implicated, as though looking voyeuristically into a room.

Tim Schultz reassembles Freudian theory in melodramatic morphological scenes. The painterly vocabularies of the Rococo, Neo-Gothic and Symbolist movements become nodes in the circulation and translation of the painterly archive to uphold the vitality of a perennial Surrealism. In *Blood Red Make-up at Twilight*, 2015, lunar light is painted in a melancholy palette but comical, and erotic. Bulging forms and eyes, not treated as fixed organs, enliven the scene. Schultz typically paints figures with elongated limbs like the Mannerists, with mantis-like appendages reflecting his interest in Freud's Oedipus complex. Seamless gradations of oil-painted folds, in-turning and out-turning as smooth membranous skin, suggest a single level of sensation, like a body without organs. The exchange of glances between the eye and hand mirror reminds us of Vasari's assertion that painting is the act of embracing the mirrored pool's surface. Like Narcissus, the figure engages in the act of mirror formation, a homely act.

For our distant ancestors, the cave was the first 'home' and the earliest paintings paired hand and wall as index or icon—hands were touched, pressed and printed inside cave walls. Moreover, Socrates and Plato compared the world of the senses to shadows cast on a cave wall, another index of a presence. **Angela Brennan's** painting *Nick Cave/Plato's cave* playfully questions the origins of reality and illusion, the paradoxical spaces of dark rock star and lit shadow come together. Her fascination with the 'stuff of life', especially subatomic physics, often manifests in brightly coloured abstract shapes and lines that embody the passage of force through matter. Her work radiates through physics and intense colour. These 'text' inspired paintings pictorialise words and numbers, themselves abstractions of material energy. Quotes and equations are returned to the materiality of colour, transforming objective notation into an enveloping network of human associations. Formulas might be associated with homework, brewing or cooking.

Amber Boardman's *Coffee Extremist* painting evades mimetic representation. The alchemy of coffee-making becomes the subject of expressive painterly gestures that spiral and swirl using the movement of her whole arm. Forms from a coffee machine double as science laboratory, culminating in the ultimate alchemical act, intoxicating coffee and swirls of colour. Overlapping cross contours and concentric rings record the event of their own materialisation, echoing the material life of time foaming in the surface layers of café latte art patterns and the seductive effects of material qualities such as shiny metal, foam, and colour.

Alex Gawronski's loungeroom interior invites us into a comforting room of furnishings with painting as décor. Here we see painting as part of a system, a network of distribution and exhibition, from the artist to the market, to home and then back into the exhibition space. In this context, cushions double as monochrome paintings, suggesting painting as a set of conventions. The circulation of wealth is the theme of this collection. Gawronski asks: "If art's purpose is not to support the social and political dominance of the wealthy, what is it?" As a formation of allowable forms born under historical conditions, painting might protest its slippery value as a commodity in the commercial art world. We might think of painting! as an interjection—an agitprop, negotiating the desire for a safe, conflict-free home.

The often-autobiographical art of Kamilaroi and Bigambul artist **Archie Moore** fragments signifiers of the home to bring the socio-economic implications of colonisation into view. The pattern of his painting *Bannertree floor* is based on the lino floor of his father's house in the 1950s. The artwork's title takes its name from the home's location of Bannertree, located just outside the NSW town of Inverell. Moore's painterly gestures imbue the floral rhythmic pattern with effect, while its installation on the gallery floor conjures a sense of dislocation, trauma and loss. As with much of the artist's work that reconstructs houses or school spaces, this floor demands contemplation. Its status as a fragment suggests the disruption resulting from the colonial experience. The materiality of the floor embodies intersections between the high and low, modern art and domestic culture.

Lisa Radford's paintings of carpets and awnings are placed in parallel relationships. *Furniture Painting* is hung high in contrast to the *Understudies* series. Her *Understudies* series, completed in lockdown while listening to Adele, orchestrates abstract patterns from Hitler's Bunker carpet, Caesar's Palace and The Imperial (the pub she frequented with dear friend Damiano Bertoli, the late Melbourne artist). As painterly clues, they function as indexical signs, insinuating stories and the vestiges of past lives. Patterned brushstrokes suggest the texture of loop pile, while one of the awnings contains a ghostly translucent white glaze signifying the imperial overlay from French-mandated Lebanon. The paintings function as artefacts of a broken system of images and language, one that plays or messes with origins. These artefactual fragments are recomposed to comment on something larger and haunting: the colonial settler and the imperial ghost overhead and underfoot.

Hany Armanious' carpet work is a network of labour that embodies reproductions of his four-year-old child's drawings scanned and enlarged to print onto cut pile nylon. The heavy meandering scribble made of everyday felt-tip markers becomes a painted gesture, and combined with the 'readymade' support it transgresses traditional painting through new methods and means. Painting as a verb, is to cover something with 'paint' but, as in the eyes of Marcel

Duchamp, Armanious' work is a labour of choice. Instead of the floor, the carpet is hung on the wall as a painting, and instead of being made by him, the work is manufactured, reordering the relationship between high art and low art, author and work. More than anything, the 'painting' is a readymade contingent on the fact that Armanious has prioritised the capacity to choose—artistic labour is reorganised—revitalising painting.

Diena Georgetti's paintings are multilateral, quoting multiple eras from the history of painting. Movements such as Orphism, Futurism, Symbolism, Cubism and Impressionism as well as design are networked in diagrammatic juxtaposition that carry us back and forth in time as well as through the picture plane. She states, "In living a parallel relationship with [these] modernists, and all they have gifted me, I am provided more familial relevance than any blood or gene". The interiors of her canvases explore the effects of these 'familial' ties. Before executing her paintings, Georgetti plans their compositions and arranges them in living-room interiors via Photoshop, testing them out in homes, as if troubleshooting their right to 'become'. To be at home with painting also reflects familial ties, a kinship or sympoietic relationship with other artists.

Newell Harry's small painterly drawings exploit a depth of field where forms appear in and out of focus, like a photograph. Processes of tracing, washing and erasing depict icons such as a window, the moon and bananas. Through these indexical processes the objects appear as silhouette, outline and vestige, shifting in and out of view like shadows passing through the rooms of a house. The images themselves glide between representational forms—words, gestures and figures are added or erased months, years or decades later, before they cohere. Autobiography emerges as an outcome of the time they take to make. As one drawing notes, 'at home it's just really fucken boring'. Nonetheless, Harry's vision finds the mysterious in the everyday, dissolving it or executing in delicate strokes. Despite their simplicity, their 'boring' origins, they mediate reality through physical marks that reverberate vitality, suspending the wonder of notes and fragments.

Painting is often compared to the body (another kind of home); we speak of painting as skin, its fleshiness, and more recently its liveliness—of painting as containing 'living labour'. The act of stroking and caressing a surface, or being stroked, has often been associated with the labour of nurturing motherhood. Motherhood appears as a domestic metaphor in **Jahnne Pasco-White's** ecologically driven paintings. Quoting Donna Harraway (2008) who posits 'becoming-with' nature as a form of interconnection, Pasco-White's 'relations of becoming' are made by incorporating synthetic and organic materials such as avocado, marigold, turmeric and pomegranate, to name a few. These materials might be considered 'messmates' intermingling with notions of art materials and food, motherhood and painting, as Helen Johnston speculates, "the painting has a sort of mother, like vinegar. The paintings are fed, they digest and excrete"¹.

Often making a painting is to experience the highs and lows of sympoiesis, the metaphor of the poietic work as a living thing. The view that painting has a life of its own is also often corollary to a Pygmalion coming into being. As WT Mitchell suggests, an image may want and need things. Whether one believes in the mystery of transubstantiation or not, a painting can make for good company—or the inverse, a 'difficult' painting may be thrown out of home, as is often seen dumped on footpaths. 'Rubbish' can also be 'rehoused,' as in my own work *Albatross* in which a worn bag (to which I admit I am attached) is revitalised as a painterly support. Like the proverbial albatross, which is said to hang 'around one's neck,' the burden of heavy baggage and its associated tasks might hinder painting. However, painting is at home on this bag—a pragmatic, readymade surface with the pattern of albatross potentially lightening one's load. It is a painting which may have no intention of staying at home.

To be at home with painting has an inbuilt elasticity. These artists, while 'at home' with paintings, explore them as unfixed objects. They implore us to explore their 'homely' worlds while challenging us to decode contemporary painting.

Madeleine Kelly, March, 2024

¹ Johnston, Helen "On Messmates" in N.A.J. Taylor (ed) *Jahnne Pasco-White: Kin*, Art Ink and Unlikely Publishing, Melbourne/Naarm, (2021), p.14 .

Mitchell, W. J. T. "What Is an Image?", *New Literary History* 15, no. 3 (1984).