AN INVESTIGATION OF INTERIORITY: BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF SUBJECT AND INTO THE PRACTICE OF PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

This document charts a painter's intention to evolve ambiguous and geographically indeterminate spaces that are potentially neither inside nor outside, public or private that are constructed from two dimensional images, in an unremitting state of realisation, keeping our view in constant motion. Postmodern discourses relating to interiority and discussed in architecture and interior design were used as a lens to extend and challenge the context and content of this figurative painting practice.

Architectural theorist Beatriz Colomina's critique of Peter and Alison Smithson's House of the Future (1956), laid the groundwork for the theoretical position of this project, by focusing upon how domestic conditions are dichotomous. Anthony Vidler's writing on Architecture Cornered: Notes on the Anxiety of Architecture and the theories of Jeanette Budgett on the curtain designs of Petra Blaise, appraise the domestic interior in new ways. They all draw attention to levels of discomfort in the representation of the domestic realm.

To mine the notion of security versus disharmony in paintings of rooms, research began into potential and variable thresholds and boundaries of domestic spaces. 1960s New Zealand modernist interiors, architecture and objects give regional resonance in the experimentation of subject matter.

A critical shift from looking to an interior as subject, to a pivotal focus on the interiority of the practice resulted in a greater awareness of process in the construction of paintings. Clarification of key procedural approaches led to an apparent division of subject matter into the re-presentation of portraiture, and paintings of fabricated rooms. This strategy established a dialogue that sets up tensions between both subject and painting conventions in the manipulation of spatial ambiguity in the picture plane. Synthesis of theoretical and practical research culminates in populated painted aggregations of the domestic interior, paintings that make manifest a re-engineering of the familiar through technique, content, and context.
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PART ONE
ANTERIOR: THE HOUSE OF THE FUTURE

A transient prototype house, on display for fewer than 50 days and then dismantled, has been a pivotal instrument in ways to consider subject and context in this Masters project.

The House of the Future (H.O.F), was designed by British architects Peter and Alison Smithson in 1956. It was conceived as an exhibition home projecting a domestic environment 25 years into the future to the year 1981, and was commissioned by the Daily Mail newspaper to celebrate their Jubilee Ideal Home Exhibition held in the giant Olympia exhibition hall in London (Figs. 1 & 2).

The Smithson’s designed the House of the Future as an expendable product for a post-war consumerist society. Industrial and technological advances developed during and after the war resulted in the Smithson’s visionary home encapsulating the latest space aged synthetic material of the time, plastic. It seemed a home of the future would be one encased in the curvilinear forms of moulded plastic, prophetically our food would be pre-prepared, radiated to remove germs and entombed in plastic, we would lie on beds of latex, covered only in a sheet of nylon as we slept peacefully in air conditioned comfort (Fig. 3).

The House of the Future had been presented as an idealised home, a site that grounded the viewer through the familiar recognition of domestic functionality, demonstrating new materials and envisioning futuristic technologies. However, Beatriz Colomina in a critique Unbreathed Air, asserts that the image of this consummate home conflicts with its conceptual provocation and fabrication. Living at the time in the shadow of the cold war with the memory of World War II still omnipresent, the House of the Future was designed to seal off from the outside through a series of skins to provide a container for living.1 Subsequently, Colomina suggests this was less of a dream home and more of a reactionary fortress full of defenses to counter threats from the outside world. “Almost every detail of the house can be explained as a defense system against pollution, noise, dust, cold, views, germs, and visitors. It was precisely by countering each one of these threats that the H.O.F was able to produce an image of idealized perfection.”2 The disturbance lies in the construct of this synthetic idyll, an idea of tranquility that is only activated by the threat of imminent danger.

Furthermore, Colomina suggests that this home was built as a series of images, and the navigation of a system of layers and openings controlled the viewing of this home and its occupants. The private interior of the House of the Future was shielded from immediate view by a series of membranes. Rectangular walls formed an exterior shell, a thin horizontal slit providing the first peeps into the curvilinear House of the Future. A corridor and viewing platforms followed the perimeter, allowing surveillance through windows and openings of the dwelling within. The domestic layout encircled a courtyard open to the sky. Whilst the House of the Future presented an idea of an intensely cloistered domestic environment, it was conceived as a stage, it’s secrets relentlessly on exhibit to the public.3 Models enacting domestic tasks were photographed for media publications, while images were broadcast via television and newsreels. Colomina states: “The image of playful domestic life that it transmitted cannot be separated from a fear of the outside.”4 This rupture of the idyllic notion of the projected self-containment of the House of the Future began to shape this painting practice.

2 Colomina, “Unbreathed Air,” 49
3 Ibid, 41
4 Ibid, 46.
Studio research from 2006 began to access new subject matter to realise an endeavour to irrupt the familiar in paint. These works drew upon the self-containment of the House of the Future in an ambition to create an other ‘world’. Looking to New Zealand as a self-contained island nation, early paintings and monoprints (Fig. 4), focused on a post colonial mix of northern hemisphere based fairytales such as the Grimm brothers Snow White and Little Red Riding Hood,⁵ and figurative statuary from the European porcelain manufacturers Meissen and Royal Doulton. The intrusion came in the form of introduced pests; Mustelids including stoats, ferrets and weasels, and possums, rats, rabbits, goats and horses that have caused harm to New Zealand in the form of erosion or the loss or diminishing numbers of native species of plants, birds and animals. The appearance of these pests was through amalgamation with figures, creating uneasy amorphic creatures (Fig. 5). The disturbance of the familiar was then amplified where hybrid female forms were immobilised, cast in the plinth-like bases of antique statuary (Fig. 6).

Like the Smithson’s House of the Future, these works activated the paradisal notion of an intensely private self-containment, a ‘world’ within a world. Visual imagery of caves, grottos, and islands grounded the view in the natural environment. The unknown, loitering in the peculiarities of the fabricated spatial conditions and the anthropomorphic figures, then unseated the notion of the familiar.

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⁵ The Grimm brothers wrote a collection of fairy tales based on German folklore. First published in 1812, these initial stories were originally critiqued as being unsuitable for children due to darker themes including sexual references and violence. Versions of the Grimm’s fairy tales continue to be popular in children’s literature today, such as Cinderella, Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood.
2010: PROJECT BEGINNING

Over many years a personal fascination in seeing other people’s houses and visiting open homes bordered on obsession. New Zealand home interiors magazines, architectural house publications and the local real estate section of the newspaper had fuelled this predilection. Over time, it became apparent that these images of the domestic held strangeness. Initially this interest felt like a private viewing, deriving an almost unseemly enjoyment from the act of looking. Yet this was a viewing of the intimate spaces of the home by common invitation. There was a ubiquity about the way these contemporary interiors looked, from rarified architectural publications to the homes for sale in real estate advertisements, open for viewing in the newspaper and online. On closer reflection, many of these images were styled, staged for the anticipated public viewing.

There is a peculiarity in the way these homes are photographed. The documentation of architect-designed homes either omits (Fig. 7) or deliberately blurs the figure (Fig. 8). When figures are present in the photograph, the figure is marginalised. Often the face cannot be seen (Fig. 9), or figures are placed to the periphery, not facing the camera but looking out from the structure, themselves viewers (Fig. 10). Homes for sale show off the skills of the burgeoning industry of ‘home staging’ where an eclectic array of furniture is shipped out, and tastemakers re-stage the interior to provide a blank canvas and an ‘ideal’ living space (Fig. 11 & 12). The figure has been shipped out too. As architecture and particularly domestic architecture is a container for living, it is odd that the figure does not appear at the locus.

These discoveries led to an overwhelming sense of unhomeliness. The dichotomy was that spaces designed for inhabitation were showing little sign of occupation. Anthony Vidler explores the idea of the unhomely or ‘uncanny’ (unheimlich) in his book, *The Architectural Uncanny*. He claims it is a sensibility rooted in the modern tradition, first experienced in the late eighteenth century in the form of fairy tales, horror stories and gothic novels. The short stories of E.T.A. Hoffman and Edgar Allan Poe played “precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence, on a psychological level, it’s play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same.” Amplification of the sensation of the unhomely lay in reading these stories about the rupture of domestic security in the comfort of an armchair at home: Vidler’s suggestion of ‘doubling’ existing in the movement between the real and the imagined.

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Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny, 3-4.*
Continued demand today for the horror and thriller genres in literature demonstrate a social delight in all that is not what it seems. Seduced by an atmosphere of the familiar, we are at heart, deliciously intrigued and fearful of the introduced unknown.

Vidler noted that: “As articulated theoretically by Freud, the uncanny or unheimlich is rooted by etymology and usages in the environment of the domestic, or the heimlich, thereby opening up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence: thence its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis.” In a postmodern society, the uncanny operates in a field well beyond the boundaries of experience that Freud expounded. The advent of the television, the internet and major advances in mobile phone and communication devices have transcended time and space, vision and sound, radically altering and undermining expected modes and conditions of behaviour and social norms. In the post-modern domestic environment, it has become commonplace for a home to have multiple televisions, computers and telephones. This has resulted in the changing social dynamics of the inhabitants. Where the family would once gather around the piano, the wireless or the radio, entertainment opportunities and stimulus within the home now proliferate. David Pagel in the essay Light Space and Darkness comments: “A historically unprecedented level of visual stimulation constantly bombards us, diminishing attention spans as it fuels the desire for instantaneous gratification. And the wide-open silences that once left individuals free to allow their imagination to roam aimlessly have been replaced by the incessant, omnipresent, invisibly transmitted communications made possible by a plethora of wireless technology, including cell phones, instant text messages, e-mail and the Internet.” The accessibility and mobility of wireless technology challenges and repurposes the once defined rooms of the domestic interior. Technology has potentially created a cyber form of the uncanny or unhomely, through the fracturing of traditional social aspects of the home: an idea of estrangement through the pursuit of individual requirements and desires.

Television ‘reality’ shows such as ‘Big Brother’ and the ‘Playboy Mansion’ have further corrupted the notion of the home interior as a private world. The viewer has become privy to, and increasingly desensitised by the daily ablutions, arguments and love lives of the inhabitants of these interiorised compounds. The shifting terrain of that which is public and that which is private, gained traction in the modern era. In looking to the Smithson’s 1956 House of The Future Beatriz Colomina comments that: “The H.0.F. was both intensely privatized, closed to the outside, an architecture of paranoia, and yet relentlessly on exhibit, broadcasting its secrets. Radical withdrawal combined with radical exposure.” This was a house closed to the outside but multiple images were transmitted to the public via TV, newsreels, magazines and newspapers. Today ‘you Tube’ beams the private events of the domestic and its inhabitants around the world in the seconds it takes to access a clip. Facebook, blogs, Pinterest and Twitter have created an open forum around our personal thoughts and actions. Chatting across the world via Skype opens up not just the participant, but also the interior to scrutiny.

As a result, there is a growing sense of placelessness or displacement as previous boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private are traversed and refraamed. This project therefore, is a personal response to these concerns.

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8 Popular themes in current literature include the zombie genre, as in Justin Cronin’s The Passage (2010), and the vampire genre of Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series (first book published 2005).

9 Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny, Preface x.


11 Colomina, “‘Grey Room,’” 46.
THE UNCANNY MATTER OF SPACE: THRESHOLDS AND BOUNDARIES

This Master’s project was born from an initial desire to escape the quotidian in the creation of a painted other ‘world’, a quieter realm to inhabit visually and in the mind. Urban dwelling and technology has created a compression of time, space and a dearth of silence. David Pagel notes: “Today, emptiness, silence and even distance are in short supply. More people are packed into bigger, more cacophonous urban sprawls than ever before.”

The plethora of noise, text and image that comprise the technology highway has led to a personal nostalgia for a reprieve from a sound and vision overload. The project began in search of quiet painted places, wide-open silences serving the viewer’s imagination in the stimulation of memory.

With the ruptured interiority of the Smithson’s House of the Future in mind, the paintings of this project are underpinned by a central notion: to situate the subject of the painting as something familiar and to introduce a disturbance. Establishing the paintings of this project in recognisable territory was intended to ground the viewer. An early focus was upon the domestic interior for figurative imagery, as the domestic interior holds a strange dichotomy. The site of the home is perceived as a refuge but it can also be a place of disharmony. The condition of modern estrangement can be interpreted by looking at discussions by Anthony Vidler, on the uncanny, as it pertains to architecture and the domestic:

“As a concept, then, the uncanny has, not unnaturally found its metaphorical home in architecture: first in the house, haunted or not, that pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of the interior, and then in the city, where what was once walled and intimate, the confirmation of community—one thinks of Rousseau’s Geneva—has been rendered strange by the spatial incursions of modernity. In both cases, of course, the ‘uncanny’ is not a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any spatial conformation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming.”

Vidler suggests that the uncanny does not therefore lie in just rendering the strange, or in any one aesthetic configuration of space. Our projection of experience imbues the familiar with memory creating a narrative, and the uncanny lies between this state of subconscious and conscious understanding. This idea led to using visual clues from the domestic interior to underpin paintings with a sense of the familiar. Painted in combination with an ambiguous pictorial space, the familiar could potentially defamiliarise and activate a sense of the uncanny in viewing the paintings of this project.

The idea for these paintings of interiors often began from looking at magazine photographs showing fleeting glimpses of atmospheric conditions, but the resulting painted rooms were constructed; a fabricated idea of an interior from auction catalogues of furniture, magazine articles on homes, and invented from memory.

Investigations looked at potential and variable thresholds and boundaries of interior space to interrupt a straightforward interpretation of painted rooms. Thresholds are a point of entry or a point at which something begins to take effect. A boundary marks the limits of a space, either physical or implied. Both thresholds and boundaries differ between cultures and histories, but have the propensity for psychological tension and unease if inverted or traversed.

Of particular interest to this project were doorways, windows, overhangs or awnings and gateways: thresholds that mark an intersection between the inside private sanctum and the outside or public realm. Architectural theorist Quentin Stevens states that this moment of suspension or threshold between two sites can be interpreted as a liminal space. These thresholds are the point of departure or release from one zone of behaviour and actions to another, a tipping point: “Thresholds are risky spaces, sites of tension between security and exposure.” Architectural thresholds can operate as subconscious sites of psychological unease, of nervous expectation and potential apprehension in the face of a changing mode of social behaviour. For example, the entryways of major public buildings are a point of social convergence, and railway stations, with a dense congregation of people coming and going, lead to varied encounters with strangers and an exposure to new experiences.

12 Pagel, “Light and Space and Darkness,” 23.
15 Ibid, 442.
16 Ibid, 445.
The interior corner operates as a boundary, a site in the margins of the centre stage of domestic activity. In architecture, the corner is a juncture, a point of tension as planes terminate and intersect resulting in a compression of space. Often physically load bearing, the interior corner can manifest as psychologically load bearing. In a domestic space, the interior corner usually signifies security, but Anthony Vidler suggests in the essay “Architecture Cornered,” that this sense of the familiar could defamiliarise into Freud’s notion of the uncanny, a sensation that represents as:

something “familiar” that has been thought of as repressed but that suddenly and unexpectedly returns, a corner so homey, might in a second become unhomy, “unheimlich,” or uncanny. It would then be a trap, a phobic enclosure, a place of hidden and best-forgotten nightmares, a place of mystery, and an imprisoning space, the privileged site of claustrophobia. Corners that are windows, alternately, would be those openings that let in the unwanted outside, the unruly city: they would introduce the public into the shelter of the private, the agoraphobia of the street into the relative shelter of the house. 17

These ideas suggest a coagulation of psychological unease in the boundaries of interior corners. Corners may re-present a repressed past, confronted through inverted nostalgia. There is a noticeable fracture or disconnection of the interior corner from the rest of the dwelling. This makes it an ideal place for the inert pastimes of observation and contemplation. However, this disconnect of the interior corner to the central activity of the home, can bring to bear a ‘dis-connect’ or psychological estrangement from the central family unit. Many children have been sent to the corner as ‘punishment’, or the more recent term, ‘for time out’. In light of these ideas, corners and junctures began to assume a greater primacy in the early paintings of the project, turning the overlooked into the contemplated and observed.

To access a sense of the uncanny, paintings of interiors began to incorporate the thresholds of windows and doorways in conjunction with corners. These paintings focused on the seemingly stagnant periphery of the domestic interior. At times an ambition was to activate the atmospheric feeling of spatial compression through the formal techniques of light and shadow upon interior details such as heavy wooden paneling (Fig. 13) and curtaining (Fig. 14), or through the cloistering of spaces with bookshelves (Fig. 15). This sense of claustrophobia was countered in other paintings with mirroring extending the reflected window view (Fig. 16), and hallways terminating in windows onto the wide-open spaces of an exterior (Fig. 17). Painting the idea of a domestic corner may serve to situate the viewer in the familiar territory of the closeted spaces of the home, and in our projection of experience, this corner may de-familiarise, becoming the unheimlich of Freud’s theories. 18

At the same time, painting the architectural boundaries of apertures such as windows and doorways could potentially invoke psychological apprehension of an exposure to an outside condition, of the private made public.


In conjunction with research that interrogated corner conditions, investigations commenced around curtaining. Curtaining was found to provide a variable compositional strategy in painting as both a threshold and a boundary between inside and outside. As a signifier to an interior state, Jeanette Budgett notes: “Curtains are linked domestically to the recurring patterns of daily existence. They mark the passage of day into night, the advance and retreat of public and private life.” The curtain’s undulating forms can alternate from billowy, filmy and transparent, to ‘blackout’ and opaque. They can lead to the compression and expansion of a sense of space, translated as tension and relief in painted spaces. As a filter to light, the curtain can transmute the homely interior into a shadow filled box, a place of the hidden memories and dormant skeletons of the uncanny.

Film directors have long known the power wielded by the domestic curtain. English film director and producer, Alfred Hitchcock, a master at creating moments of suspense, made full use of the cinematic properties of the filtering curtain. Playing upon psychological fears, the curtain could be inferred as the only division between the sinister and the innocent. This is evident in the movie Psycho where the shower curtain is a particularly impotent barrier to impending terror (Figs. 18 & 19).

As a divider of space, there is a performative act in opening and closing of a curtain, particularly of full-length curtains that require full bodily involvement. “The action to draw curtains involves the body in a cross wise gesture in which the arm may describe the arc of enclosure. A boundary is ‘drawn’ around a space.” Thick opaque, or transparent thin, the closure of curtains signals an ‘enclosure’, a corralling of all that is within.

This notion of ‘drawing’ a curtain as a psychological barrier around a space was employed in the painting Untitled (Fig. 20), where the painted net curtain with its flimsy patterned homeliness becomes the stockade against the unknown potential terrors of the exterior. Vidler states that: “For Freud, ‘unhomeness’ was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream.” This painted dreamy thin curtain re-presents itself as a barricade to the fear of the outside: interiority in the absence of a visible painted architecture.

Fabrics, styles, and positioning of curtaining can intimate markers in time. “The visual ambiguity of the curtain is further dramatised by invoking all the many veils of social convention (the wedding veil, the nun’s veil, the Islamic veil). Formally the veil acts to distance, remove and defer certainty or clarity. Socially it operates to connote the private, or perhaps to seduce, and culturally the veil has traditional associations with the cloistering of women.” Curtaining could act as a metaphor for these social and cultural histories in paintings notable for their absence of human forms.

Paintings of curtains together with corners became a way of activating a sense of the compression or the expansion of space. Open curtains signal the welcome of the exterior to the interior, closed they present the interior as stage with a focus on the private. Employing the concept of the curtain ‘drawn’ as a boundary around the interior, the opacity of the painted curtain was manipulated. Gauze-like veils allowed a transparency, a literal ‘blurring’ of the boundaries between the different conditions of interior and exterior, these painted spaces appear divided, but the notion of space is still expanded beyond the interior (Fig. 20). Layering a light translucent membrane over
an under-painted scene proved to be a pragmatic technique. This variable strategy was used to relegate particular painted subject matter into the background to a more, or lesser degree. Curtains of a greater opacity were painted to disrupt a conventional perspectival viewing point as a linear progression from foreground to background (Fig. 21). This acts in de-centering our view, focusing awareness on the temporal aspects of the painted space (Fig. 22). Painted opaque curtains became a way of indicating spaces of confinement. Psychologically, blocking the windows negated its original purpose for ventilation and light, leading to a sensation of airlessness and staleness.

Further research into the idea of constricting and flattening space, informed the making of paintings that utilised abstracted forms related to taxonomies of curtaining. Pelmets and swags in interior decoration add a formal detail to the top of windows. These forms were reduced to simple abstracted forms to contract the space of the painting. Often painted in a dark colour, ‘swags’ accentuate a feeling of compression, bearing down on the depicted interior (Figs. 23 & 24).

Pattern proved to be versatile as a painted mark, from a mechanical and opaque application to a more fluid and transparent layer. These properties of pattern made it a useful compositional tool. It was deployed to create surface tension, flattening the space of the picture plane while continuing to allude to the decoration and textiles of the domestic interior. Unconcerned with true fabric representation, three main marks have been materialised; the first is based on a traditional chevron pattern, the second on a looping wave form, the final, a version of the chevron, the zigzag. These same patterns progressed from referencing the fabric of curtaining, to wallpaper and carpets (Figs. 25-27).
An interest in New Zealand mid to late century modernist interiors, architecture and objects began in childhood. Formative years were spent in a house built with a distinctive New Zealand take on modernism. Designed by Hamilton architect Dick Mercer in 1973, the concept for this dwelling was based on the Californian ranch house. This house featured open plan living, raked and beamed ceilings, an exposed block fireplace, and wood: A wooden kitchen, wooden louvred doors, wooden sarking and wooden furniture from the mid-century to the 1970’s. Wood that could veer from a comforting brown to an oppressive heaviness that threatened to drown out light itself (Fig. 28).

The architectural trope of ‘exposing’ the framework in architecture was an idea that began to be courted in paint. The reduction of this framework, particularly of the rafters of roof forms to a skeletal form could act as a metaphor for a dwelling without challenging the transparency of the painting layers. This acted as a key element to access a view of an ‘outside’ and led to the first paintings of this project to address a clear condition of exteriority, and its increasing influence on the interior.

In domestic architecture, modernism heralded the blurring of boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private spaces. By the mid twentieth century, a distillation of the early doctrines of modernist ideals was forming, with architects looking to use local materials and find an architectural interpretation of International Modernism that was better suited to our climate. The traditional concept of domestic architecture characterised by a central hallway, formal front room, conventional front door and backdoor and small vertical windows was being challenged by a number of New Zealand architects, championing a new post-war informality and cultural shift in the way we lived. Modernism not only offered a new aesthetic of dwelling, but also provided lessons for living in these new spaces. Since this pivotal change can be noted in the example of architecture known as the ‘First House’, by the Group Architects in 1949 (Fig. 29). Revealing wooden rafters, this house exposed the structure and framework of the architecture to a degree not seen before in New Zealand. This ‘stripping bare’ symbolised a cleansing of the vestiges of colonial artifice. With large doors opening directly to the outside, the relationship of the house to its site was more direct. In combination with the use of unpainted wood, the opening of the spaces of the interior to the exterior relaxed the boundaries of the natural and the built, the indoor and the outdoor.

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NEW ZEALAND MODERNISM

24. Students from the Auckland School of Architecture including W.D Wilson, Marilyn Hart, Bruce Rotherham, William Touniath and Alan Wild formed the Group Architects in the late 1940’s.
Paintings such as Unheimlich (Fig. 30), began to adopt the reduction of the geometries of architecture to a framework. The skeletal form of the rafters suggest a dwelling but an overall transparency is a key in accessing a view to an ‘outside’.

The feeling of dis-ease in the painting Unheimlich lies in the contrast of a furniture-choked interior, countered by an overarching sense of space beyond the dwelling. The spatial condition of modern domestic interiors came to “offer a radical new openness.”26 Overcrowding in Unheimlich sits in opposition to this state. The functionality of these domestic items has been negated, making the interior space ambiguous in its role. In the lower half of this work, the space beyond the translucent curtain appears to be an ocean floor or an aquarium. In an incongruous contrast, at the top a painted wall mural is caught in a ticker-tape parade. Reflected in the sombre green and brown toning of the mid-century domestic furniture is the glow from a celebratory yet vaguely discordant lemon yellow, acid green, lilac and turquoise.

Compositionally, a challenge lay in the long thin format. To enable the eye to traverse the entire work, a painted mezzanine floor of furniture provided a partial stepping-stone between top and bottom. While the illusion of space is deliberate in the modeled furniture within the house in the lower half, there is a conscious contrast to the ‘exterior’ flat and abstracted forms culminating with rafters presenting as flat painted brown diagonal lines sitting at the surface. Movement is generated in the increased scale of marks of the upper ‘background’, which makes them become ‘foreground’, as they begin to match and rival the scale of the furniture and compete for supremacy.

An ambition for the painting Red Sky (Fig. 31), was to alter the balance of the exterior to the interior, a greater emphasis on a condition of ‘outside’. Amorphic marks form a background to a painted window framework and a small 1950’s table reflecting the outside ‘glow’, alluding to an interiority of the depicted space. In Red Sky, it is the extremes of scale that are unusual. Our relative size becomes palpable on noticing the size of table in relation to the outside landscape. On the threshold of a precipice, only a sheer curtain withholds any transcendent ambitions of reaching this ‘heaven’. Or hell.

Upon reflection, Unheimlich and Red Sky can now be understood as an anomaly at this point in this project. To date, paintings had been of a largely pre-conceived image of an interior. Unheimlich and Red Sky were created by a different procedural approach. These paintings were instead built in layers where new marks were painted in reaction and response to existing painted forms giving rise to an ambiguity of subject and of the space of the picture plane. Looking to architectural discourse on modernism helped establish a greater relationship of an exterior condition to a painted idea of interiority. These key changes held an ongoing influence in further paintings of this project.

26 Lloyd Jenkins, At Home, 128.
OFF LIMITS: FREEING SPACE OF THE PICTORIAL PLANE

The aims of the project were to evolve ambiguous and geographically indeterminate spaces that are potentially neither inside nor outside, public or private, that are constructed from two-dimensional images, keeping our view in constant motion. Modern architecture is significant in thinking about these spaces both as a framework for execution and in creating a condition to be experienced in a contemporary painting practice.

Prior to modernism, windows in architecture were traditionally of portrait format. These vertical elements framed and fixed the exterior view. In the houses of architect Le Corbusier (1887-1965), entire walls became windows, horizontal sheets of glass that opened the view to the activity of the outside. These windows acted as ‘walls’ of moving images. Beatriz Colomina likens the inhabitants of Le Corbusier houses to movie viewers in their inability to arrest the view:

“...the point of view of modern architecture is never fixed, as in baroque architecture, or as in the model of vision of the camera obscura, but always in motion, as in film or in the city. Crowds, shoppers in a department store, railroad travelers, and the inhabitants of Le Corbusier’s houses have in common with movie viewers that they cannot fix (arrest) the image...they inhabit a space that is neither inside nor outside, public nor private (in the traditional understanding of these terms). It is a space that is not made of walls but of images. Images as walls.”

Le Corbusier devised the idea of the horizontal window as one of his Five Points Towards A New Architecture. In the design of the house Villa Savoye (1928-31) Poissy (Figs. 32 & 33), Le Corbusier made use of these walls of glass, reframing the idea of interior/exterior as the eye travels through these transparent spaces once given opaque boundaries in architecture.

The other of Le Corbusier’s Five Points were pilotis, reinforced concrete stilts that provided the structural support for the house allowing for the further points of a free façade and an internal plan libre or ‘free space’ to be implemented. Le Corbusier was the first to separate the idea of the wall as a structural element creating a framework that could allow walls to be re-positioned within the internal floor plan at will. The fifth point was the creation of a roof garden.

In the painting Untitled (Fig. 34), the intention was to activate the plan-libre concept of Le Corbusier through paint. Crystalisation of the idea of the picture plane as a free space allows a freedom of spatial division in a painting. Images as walls, transparent or opaque, sit within a space for the eye to negotiate. These shifting planes with divergent lines of perspective, tensions of scale, shuttering of light and shadow, layering and palimpsest, make the viewing eye traverse and oscillate as if caught in a three-dimensional picture plane pinball. Beyond the plan libre of suggested occupation, the exclusion of a horizon line may metamorphose the pictorial space from the known to the unknown. Without this visible horizon, the ‘outside’ space no longer reads as an ‘outdoors’ space, defamiliarising into an undefined spatial vacuum.

Upon reflection, borrowing from modernist architectural ideas on the division of space helped to evolve greater spatial uncertainties in the paintings of this project. Initiating Le Corbusier’s plan libre of the ‘interior’, in conjunction with an expanded exteriority, led to paintings that activate space in a particular and dynamic way. Walls began to float in the space of the paintings rather than define it. This serves to blur the distinctions between inside and outside, public and private. Shifting planes and perspectives compete for visual primacy with surface marks. There appears to be no pattern to their re-emergence, potentially keeping our view in constant motion.
UNHEIMLICH II

Research into ‘an interior’ as subject led to Unheimlich II, a nearly seven metre long paneled painting. The idea for this work evolved from the first painting of this Masters project, a solitary corner that had fuelled early contextual and critical paths of research (Fig. 35). The five further panels that developed from it eight months later were to become the last of this series of paintings referencing the literal interior.

Initial studio research into the notion of interiority in a painting practice led to an understanding of both transparency and density, and their role in creating both the illusion of space and surface tension. The painted treatment of the subject, approaching realism from a distance, acts as a portal into a spatial dimension. Up close, illusionary distance dissolves into coloured marks and painterly gestures to remind us of the two-dimensional presence of the painted surface (Fig. 36).

In this six-paneled work Unheimlich II (Fig. 37), a specific fabrication of atmosphere is achieved through material constitution. The nature of this imagined space is particular in its air of expectancy; a suggestion of a place of waiting, perhaps a doctor’s rooms, where time has been and will be. Temporality lurks in layering and palimpsest. Underneath these interior corners, lie the remnants of older paintings. These failed ideas are obfuscated by over-painted curtaining, but are still semi visible to us, as if anticipating their own slow re-materialisation. Vinyl hospital-type furniture from the 1950’s era holds the key to the scale of these spaces, sitting against decorative wooden wall panels that hint at the faded grandeur of an older epoch.

Any desire to enter this constructed place is thwarted by the deliberate design of various visual boundaries and thresholds. An intention is to create a sense of being simultaneously both inside and outside the work. Curtaining acts as a barrier, tempting glimpses of a future outside, but the curtain’s opacity obscures and de-centers the view. The lack of a door through which to visually enter and exit this space may induce a troubled sense of enclosure.

Although multi-paneled, the sequencing does not necessarily lead the viewer to a defined narrative. Indeed, the space, through inclusion and exclusion, remains ambiguous and geographically indeterminate. Anxiety has been generated by rupturing the continuity of the interior through the points of intersection between canvases. There is enough mirroring to suggest it is the same space, but each canvas differs, suggestive of different times of day, even location. This rupturing may succeed in further dislocating the viewer. When the viewer stands surrounded by the work, their position could feel destabilised by the subtle shifts in perspective.
Upon consideration, the mechanism of intersections between the multiple canvases was overt and interrupted the intended sensory experience of atmosphere. A disjoint in the perspective between the canvases had been intentional in the studio; as a deliberate interruption to a seamless reading of the depicted space and as a way of negotiating the physical constraints of the studio in painting lines of perspective on large canvases. However, a pattern of geometric shapes had emerged in the replication, namely with the lighter green ceiling and the curtaining. From a distance, atmosphere was diminished as irregular patterns distracted and competed for supremacy (Fig. 38).

Paintings made up until this point were created by the painted fabrication and manipulation of interior and architectural details, paintings that were potentially finite in their interpretation. The realism provoked a literalism in understanding the image. It was felt that the territory of interiority in painting had more to offer than manipulating the conventions of representation.
PART TWO
CRITICAL TURNING POINT:
THE INTERIOR SUBJECT TO
THE INTERIORITY OF PRACTICE

The trajectory of this project shifted from looking to the interior as subject, to looking to the interiority of practice to generate further research. Theoretical research had played a large role in the manifestation of the paintings and it seemed strategic to allow research through making to drive this project for a period of time. Reflection upon previous paintings, strategies and working habits was aimed at achieving greater transparency and productivity to propel the project forward. Looking to the internal dialogue of studio practice, analysis showed that tensions existed in three main areas, those of procedure, technique and content.

Good Timing

Paintings had progressively become bigger and more complex. They could take weeks or months of anxious negotiation in the studio to resolve. Juggling these large, intense works that constantly teetered on the brink of success or failure of ambition was becoming increasingly difficult for my state of mind. This brought into serious question the ongoing sustainability of my painting practice. What I needed was to leave the studio at the end of the day feeling better about painting.

A conscious analysis of paintings to date, both large and small, led me to consider key moments of practice where a sense of accomplishment had occurred. It became apparent that a degree of gratification did exist during negotiations in the making of paintings. However this enjoyment of the painting's journey was amplified when practiced in conjunction with a regular completion of paintings. Taking two effective procedures already inherent in my practice and deliberately compartmentalising them into dual strands created a robust structure. Each strand could not exist without the other as these two procedural approaches act in symbiosis. The establishment of this framework reduced the chronic uncertainty in this practice to a more manageable level.

The first procedural approach is governed by tight constraints of time, size and subject. Allowing a single day to complete the painting is a time frame that produces technical constraints and certain liberties. To be able to complete the work within a day, the size of the painting needs to be small, and subject predetermined. Painting on a smaller scale has long been
a preferred method of practical research; less time and material investment gives a freedom in exploration. As oil paint takes a few days to dry, finishing these paintings in a shorter time frame necessitates the use of a wet on wet technique. The viscosities of oil paint enable one mark to slide into the next, a method full of incidental marks in its loose, fast application. These are paintings where forms are created volumetrically and not from a drawn line. Painting onto a wet surface provides a fluidity and opportunity for incidental moments to re-determine the trajectory of the painting again and again. The value of this lies in the joy of playful re-negotiation of material and the eventual emergence of the final image. By the close of the day these paintings are finished. The mindset that a regular sense of completion creates is tantamount in this practice as a platform to enact the second procedure.

The second procedural approach holds the greater challenges. It is characterised by ambiguity. There are no pre-set boundaries with the making of these paintings. This means that the size of canvas, subject matter and length of time taken to execute these works is up for negotiation. The intention for these paintings may or may not be sketched first. Upon reflection, a system of sorts becomes apparent in the creation of layers, enabling paint to dry appropriately where necessary. Beginning with colour, oscillating between conscious and visceral mark making, the more figurative forms appear in response to original intentions and to what is now there. The value lies in the overarching feeling of possibility that permeates this strategy of making. This sense of possibility leads to exploration and discovery. Littered with trial, tension and triumph, these are paintings that visually ‘wear’ their research. With the paintings from both strands, reflexive and qualitative analysis occurs after nearly every mark made on the canvas. Subsequent re-making, modification or active response to that mark is made with more marks. This iterative process helps to evolve the paintings. In a desire to create a dialogue and synthesis between the theoretical and the visual research, there is strategic use of levels of ambivalence in rendering these paintings, an awareness of that which is purposeful and that which is incidental.

Incidental marks or the ‘happy accidents’ that occur in the studio perform an important research role. Paul Feyerabend in Against Method maintains: “For what appears as ‘sloppiness’, ‘chaos’, or ‘opportunism’…has a most important function in the development of those very theories which we today regard as essential parts of our knowledge. These deviations, these errors, are preconditions of progress…without ‘chaos’, no knowledge. Without a frequent dismissal of reason, no progress”31. It is this combination of newfound knowledge and experimentation, with the more sub-conscious inherent and tacit knowledge, the interstitial of waking and dreaming, that progresses this painting practice.


Examining the interiority of this practice led to a vigorous practical structure for ongoing studio practice, one that has proved to be paramount in making a substantial leap in productivity and research development. The regular completion of the paintings of one approach provides a sense of success that then underpins the ability to continue with the more intensive paintings of the other. Understanding how these strategies operate in tension with each other can be used to rail against natural slumps in making: boredom, repetition, disengagement and disappointment can be more knowingly countered by variances in practice, and to a lesser degree, subject. This strategy of structure in the studio provides a pivotal psychological platform for mercurial instinct to take form.

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INTERIORITY OF PRACTICE: NON-PORTRAYS AND ROOMS

There has been a fugitive avoidance in defining the genre of painting that categorises this practice. Very simply, a painter of things can be classified as figurative, a painter of non-things as abstract. This practice crosses these boundaries in the pursuit of a good painting, embracing subject variance in an on-going spatial polemic. The practical understandings of how this painting practice operates had resulted in dual procedural approaches. A clear separation of subject into ‘non-portraits’ or ‘rooms’ helped to cement the intentions of each procedure. Since 1966, German painter Gerhard Richter has painted both abstract and figurative paintings in an apparent dichotomy of subject:

“The abstract pictures are no less arbitrary than all object-bound representations (based on any old motif, which is supposed to turn into a picture). The only difference is that in these the ‘motif’ evolves only during the process of painting. So they imply that I do not know what I want to represent, or how to begin; that I have only highly imprecise and invariably false ideas of the motif that I am to make into a picture; and therefore that – motivated as I am solely by ignorance and frivolity – I am in a position to start.”

Gerhard Richter maintains that the difference between abstract paintings and those from photographs resides in a more ‘knowing’ starting position, but that the practice of painting is no different. In this project, non-portraits and rooms are looking into the same spatial concerns, dealing with the same theoretical notions of interiority, but simply separated by procedural approach.

Non-Portraits.

Figures had been notably absent from this paintings practice for a considerable time. This absence began in the pursuit of painting empty, quiet spaces. While the focus of the project lay with the interior as subject, the absence of the figure became a measured strategy to amplify an ambition in creating a sense of the uncanny in paintings. The notion of an ‘absence’ can exist only in the acknowledgement of a potential ‘presence’. With the shift to dual strands of making, it seemed a logical step to continue to paint the ‘absence’ in one strand, and begin to paint the ‘presence’ of the figure in the other.

These figure paintings were referred to as ‘non-portraits’ as they are paintings about portraiture, not portraits themselves. There is no sitter. Equally there is no intended exaltation of class through painted dress or possessions, nor indeed any hint of an occupation. These figures sometimes start from a photograph of ‘someone’ from a magazine. However, it is a fleeting dalliance with that image, and often within minutes it is discarded. These are ‘people’ that reveal themselves over the day, they often change gender several times during execution (Fig. 39). They have changed from human form to statuary and back again, transcending an existence through the wet paint until someone/ something looks back (Fig. 40). When that moment is, is indeterminate.

Gerhard Richter has discussed the role that chance plays in his practice:

“All above all, it’s never blind chance: it’s a chance that is always planned, but also always surprising. And I need it in order to carry on, in order to eradicate my mistakes, to destroy what I’ve worked out wrong, to introduce something different and disruptive. I’m often astonished to find how much better chance is than I am.”

Chance can be used in a purposeful way to introduce an unknown factor into the image. The deliberate use of chance characterises the non-portrait paintings of this project, whereby the figure is insistently re-imagined through the medium of paint, until the final image comes into being. The intentional obfuscation of the original subject and the resulting developing nature of the figure, results in a re-presentation of classical ideas of portraiture. These paintings present what we understand to be a portrait, a head and shoulders, occasionally including a torso. However, these are ideas and visual clues generated through the negotiation of paint in a consideration of portraiture, not a painted representation of an actual person.


33 Gerhard Richter’s paintings of photographs, and the digitally manipulated photographs of Desiree Dolron and Loretta Lux demonstrate a re-presentation of our traditional assimilation of portraiture. The concoction of these figures, with paint or digital process hold us in a state of flux, in an interstitial of what portraiture was, what it is now, both the real and the unreal.

Experimentation with content led to new dialogues between pattern, flat surface marks and modeled form. What developed in the non-portraits was an interest in surface tension and a very shallow pictorial space. Forms at the edges of these works act as compositional markers and deployed lessons learned from earlier studio research into flattening of the picture plane (Figs. 45-47). Repetitive patterning creates lushness at the surface. These geometries float freely in the space of the picture plane whilst the figure remains both emergent from and tethered to the background. The palette consistently uses colours of a similar tonal register: dull greens, and russet browns, warm and vaguely familiar, punctured by brighter high key colours.
Pattern began to assume a greater position, moving from painted wood panels to the idea of patterned curtaining and wallpaper (Fig. 48). Patterned clothing sits on top of the translucent handling of the figure (Fig. 49). Assertive pattern activates a movement at the surface while immobilised female forms began to resemble statuesque and begin to dissolve into the background.

Sublimation

Introducing a figure or ‘body’ to the painted interior opened up a further theoretical understanding. A potential for the uncanny lies in the psychology of the way in which we read these figures and the spaces around them. In the essay *Psych and Sympathy*, Susan Sidlauskas suggests that with regard to the painted interior: “We might imagine that any figure represented within that space becomes a surrogate for the spectator’s own empathetic response: a substitute through which the viewer can vicariously ‘experience’ the imagined discomfort of a space too compressed or too attenuated, a furniture arrangement too confining, or another figure too near, or too far away.”

Sidlauskas suggests that subverting the spatial configurations in the painted interior by altering conventional understandings of the relationships between house and body, figure and ground could result in a visceral empathy for the discomfort of the protagonists. In light of these ideas, the manipulation and subversion of spatial conventions within the non-portraits was aimed at instigating a kernel of anxiety in the psychology of the viewer.

The painted figures of this project were demonstrating an increasing passivity. At times figures within the paintings have become sublimated into the interior itself, fusing the edges of the relationship between the figure and ground. Is the figure emergent or being consumed? It is an uneasy alliance.

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Looking to the painting Wallflower (Fig. 50), there is fragility in the transparency of paint use, emphasising the femininity of the subject. The repetitive pattern at first emphatically asserts itself as flat, affirming the painting as object. Without warning, this pattern assumes form, implying the shape of a head covered by a scarf. During this confusion of the animate and inanimate, it can appear that the young woman is being subsumed into the wall. The unease of this situation is negated by her apparent lack of concern.

In the painting Emily (Fig. 51), a shallow picture plane is engineered by the all over pattern, flattening the form of the figure. Dark forms suggestive of a draped pelmet at the top of this work compress the space of the picture plane further. A flesh coloured rectilinear plane protrudes into the space from the lower left, underpinned by the red geometry of an intersecting plane. Following its perspectival projection into space from an entry point at the frame it potentially reasserts itself as the girl’s arm, the red form dissolving into a negative space. There is an intentional restriction and compression of the spaces of this painting, spaces that alternate in the reading of what is figure and what is ground. This spatial incertitude may concede a nascent sense of the uncanny to be enacted in viewing this painting.
Figuring the Flaneur

The paintings of this Masters research project are notable for their ‘dis-ease’. There is no safe resting place; instead, a disharmony is at the locus of every painting. The figures that have manifested in this research project can be described as passive, disinterested and removed, contemporary painted female flaneurs (Fig. 52). The term ‘flaneur’ emerged in the 19th century; in a critique of city life by French poet Charles Baudelaire to describe a voyeuristic wanderer, an observer rather than a participant of urban performance:

“In the early part of the twentieth century the flaneur reappeared in the criticism of German Marxist Walter Benjamin, who studied the origins of modernity as experienced in the city. Benjamin recognized the detached stance of Baudelaire’s flaneur as one of the means of coping with the shock and discontinuity when experiencing the impact of the modern city. To be a flaneur is essentially to stand back and look objectively at one’s surroundings rather than be drawn into the sensory excitement of active participation.”

To date the flaneurs that occupy these paintings are largely females, placed into a domestic context in contrast to Walter Benjamin’s male figures wandering about the city. The domestic interior has long been regarded as a feminine space. The idea of these women intentionally detached from and surveying as opposed to engaging with these traditional spaces of nurture and security undermines any sense of ‘homeliness’ and potential refuge. Traditional readings of the object and the subject of the gaze hold the potential for inversion if the protagonists of these paintings are then re-present as ‘observers’.

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Rooms

The process of looking to the interiority of this practice had resulted in the use of two different procedures. The longer of the two, underpinned a continuation of research into the thresholds and boundaries of domestic details, specifically corners and curtaining. However, the ambition for these new painted rooms was to move away from rendering conventional interiors.

Contextually, this painting practice is situated within the domain characterised by visual practitioners engaging with worlds that corrupt perceptions of space and place. The preternatural is omnipresent amongst a reference to the known or the familiar.

The photographs of Gregory Crewdson (Fig. 53), often depict an eerie glowing domestic interior. Interiority manifests in an uneasy psychological atmosphere of anxiety and dislocation, creating disquieting commentaries on the underbelly of small town America. Rather than an intensive digital manipulation as process, Crewdson invents these ‘places’ in an elaborate production using props, actors, makeup, and lighting crews. Bearing the hallmarks of a stage or movie set directed by Crewdson, these are photographs of life-sized models. Harnessing the indexical nature of the photograph as artifact, Crewdson constructs ‘place’ and his photographs transpire as documentation of the ‘invented’ real.

The room paintings of Dexter Dalwood are attributed to famous owners through their titles, documenting scandalous moments in history or the apparent furnishings within these ‘real’ people’s fictitious homes (Fig. 54). Opposition lies between the realism of the painted interior spaces as a filter of the viewer’s personal memory combined with flimsy knowledge of the famous individual, and the actuality of these fabricated painted constitutions.

German painter Matthias Weischer paints contemporary melancholia, often from dioramas built in his studio (Fig. 55). These unoccupied rooms are filled with a juxtaposition of domestic detritus in a manipulation of figure and ground relationships, an overlapping of furniture, fabric, wallpaper and flooring. The mix of painting techniques and motifs from different eras propose a question of time and location. Contrasting with the visible thin wash of under painting and unrealised half finished subject, there is visceral, heavily textured three dimensional layering of paint that sits in opposition to the two-dimensional simulacrum of painted space.
These particular works of visual artists Weischer, Dalwood and Crewdon all draw attention to levels of discomfort in the domestic realm, through the actual and the constructed. In this project, reference to this notion of discomfort is sought through painted dichotomies of space and subject. Aggregations of painted architectural and interior details in combination with the reversal of figure and field 38 were formulated to engender the spatial dynamics.

The procedure of creating the ‘rooms’ was more challenging than the procedure of the ‘non-portraits’. In contrast to the flattened pictorial depth of the non-portraits, the rooms were intended to extend, and at the same time, invert the perceived space of the paintings (Fig. 56). These were canvases that were physically larger and involved the whole body in moving the paint across the entirety of the surface. Psychologically, the ambiguity and uncertainty that characterised the gradual evolution of the image permeated this process from start to finish, often months later. There was a particular drive to continue to make these paintings, despite the seemingly untenable process of unremitting negotiation with subject and material. Gerhard Richter discusses the inherent problems of painting in this manner:

“When I paint an abstract picture (the problem is very much the same in other cases), I neither know in advance what it is meant to look like nor, during the painting process, what I am aiming at and what to do about getting there. Painting is consequently an almost blind, desperate effort, like that of a person abandoned, helpless, in totally incomprehensible surroundings – like that of a person who possesses a given set of tools, materials and abilities and has the urgent desire to build something useful which is not allowed to be a house or a chair or anything else that has a name, who therefore hacks away in the vague hope that by working in a proper, professional way he will ultimately turn out something proper and meaningful.”39

It is often only through a belief that regular practice will eventually achieve positive outcomes that any hope exists in accomplishing the ambitions of the painting whilst in the midst of its production. The ‘rooms’ of this project are paintings where the negotiation of subject matter and materiality of paint comprises the final image, the challenges evidenced in the palpable layering, smudging, drawing and over painting.

38 Figure and ground reversal, known also as push/pull theory, describes a painting technique that uses cues and juxtapositions of colour, edge assignment, and form to challenge visual understanding of what is understood to be object and what constitutes the field. For example, using the optical theories of colour, considered placement of warm and cool, light and dark colours can propel shapes and marks forward or make them recede in the picture plane.

In the book Publicity and Privacy Beatriz Colomina states that for Le Corbusier: “The house is a device to see the world, a mechanism of viewing. Shelter, separation from the outside, is provided by the window’s ability to turn the threatening world outside the house into a reassuring picture. The inhabitant is enveloped, wrapped, protected by the pictures.”\(^{40}\) The interior spaces of architecture can provide a feeling of security by framing the view, abstracting the exterior space into an object, distancing the inhabitant from potential harm. However, Colomina also suggests that for Le Corbusier, windows were more aligned with control and surveillance: “In framing the landscape the house places the landscape into a system of categories. The house is a mechanism for classification. It collects views and, in doing so, classifies them. The house is a system for taking pictures.”\(^{41}\) Windows can be a form of control over the view, directing and limiting the way the inhabitant sees and is seen.

The ‘room’ paintings began to flaunt the notion of the window as a protective membrane, domesticating the ‘overpowering’ landscape,\(^{42}\) through the dissolution of the painted boundaries of inside and outside. To intensify a sense of disquiet in the painting Double Burnt Pointing (Fig. 58), a suggestion of painted window framing or curtaining was minimised, allowing an infiltration of the exterior to the interior. Abstract marks sit in opposition to modelled figuration, actuating the push and pull of surface, and depicted space. This paved the way for a latent intellectual uncertainty of the spatial dimensions of these ‘room’ paintings, rendering the familiar as strange.

\(^{40}\) Colomina, Privacy and Publicity, 7.
\(^{41}\) Ibid, 311.
\(^{42}\) Ibid, 315.
The division of vital procedural ways of making into two strands was a strategy to give a solid studio structure. By ensuring the research methods of each strand occurred in tandem led to a more harmonious and productive practice. Psychologically, this way of working had given a solid platform in understanding the need for regular gratification through completion. Working in this manner over time greatly strengthened studio practice, and led to the point where an overlapping of the various modes of practice would naturally occur.

The synthesis of subject matter occurred too. There was increasing curiosity and challenge in populating the room paintings, and have the rooms infiltrate the spaces of the portraits. The painting Jane (Fig. 59), was the first that consciously addressed the idea of the integration of rooms and non-portraits. This painting was portrait sized and resulted in a literal illustration of the idea. The space of the picture plane in Jane, is defined by painted architecture. A shift in ambition for the paintings of this project had evolved from a representation of an interior space, to a preferred ambiguity in the re-presentation of space. To avoid returning to the idea of ‘an interior’ as subject, recent discoveries into the notion of interiority as a ‘spatial’ condition in painting were deployed. Figure and ground reversal techniques were lending more interesting spatial dynamics to the paintings of this project.

A challenge lies in painting figures into these spaces and not put a halt on the eye travelling through and around the picture plane. The viewer may be drawn to the face of the figure and stop as they engage with the eyes. Likewise this challenge exists for the figurative painter; if the figure becomes realised or completed too soon, the rest of the painting can feel like a ‘colouring-in’ exercise, particularly if there is a reluctance to destroy the work already finished. This led to a review of the allusion to statuary in the fragmentation of the figure.
The sculptured aesthetic of the figures in these paintings is characterised often by cool colour toning of the skin, passivity and disinterest in surroundings, and an increasing morselation of body parts (Fig. 60). This idea is visually rooted in classical aesthetics. The sculptured re-presentation of truncated limbs and important body parts was representative of the perfection of the body as a whole in Greek and Roman antiquity.\(^4\) Strategically, as a painting device, fragmenting the figure at will opens up a conceptual freedom of composition as there is no requirement to complete the painted body.

Fragmentation suggests the truancy of a potential ‘whole’. Often the spectator’s response to the partial figure in these paintings is to make a visual connection to complete the body, this act ‘evening’ the ‘oddness’ of the absence. These fragmented figures are in a state of emergence. Paintings too, verge on incomplete in parts, a recent incursion against fully saturated and realised areas. Conscious and incidental positioning of furniture and rugs further implicate the fusion of figure and surrounds, impregnating interior objects with anthropomorphic qualities.

Figure 63. Kirsten Roberts, *Untitled*. 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 1460 x 1200mm.

Figure 64. Kirsten Roberts, *Finder*. 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 1460 x 1200mm.

Figure 65. Kirsten Roberts, *Finder*. 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 1460 x 1200mm.
PART THREE
With Juncture (Fig. 66), a first glance situates the viewer inside. Architectural planes form a diorama of domestic containment. The interior is furnished with items of everyday existence, a rug, a cabinet, pottery vases, tables and mirrors while the faded colours of a bygone era insinuate the homely. However, the staccato of both modeled and abstracted forms causes a hesitation in assuming we know this space. Further viewing reveals a corrosion of containment, the interior membrane showing ruptures in the skin and seepage of unknown exterior forms to the inside. Unmistinting, we see the surface and we see through the surface.

Within this work, fast and slow painting and flat and modeled forms contribute to the experience of a simultaneous acceleration and deceleration of time and movement. A greenish glow permeates the space, a light associated with an aquatic underworld or from a monitor screen. The enervated figure dematerialises in a figure/field reversal, her turquoise dress becoming a portal to the outside world. The dress sports an old world turquoise that sits in jarring contrast to the contemporary high key acid greens of amorphic plastic tubing floating free form in the interior space. These multiple ambiguities of temporality lead to a sense that this painted space is strangely ‘out of time’, neither of the past, of the present or of the future.

The scale of this painting is large and there is the implication of watching a motionless stage. Compositionally the schema for this painting is balanced; two central figurative forms, a woman and pipes are anchored by three rectangular forms of the same size, a large mirror to the upper left, a painting to the left of centre, and 1950’s cabinet to the right placed to impede the view. Collaged pot plants stick to the side table as the stale pink of a cut out figure leans against the back wall. The proscenium drops away in the perspective of the rug firmly locating the spectator above this immobilised scene.

The ambition for this painting was to create a spatial condition that escalated a sense of the uncanny. The construction of a capsule of familiar domestic items was to locate the viewer in recognizable territory. This familiar then defamiliarises with the realisation that the capsule ‘floats’ in the horizon-less spatial void of the unknown. At the same time, there is an over resolution to this painting, resulting in an airless and silent hermetic constriction of space. Juncture is a painting where the value of the inclusion of each painted form or condition is amplified by the negotiation of its opposite; figurative objects and abstract marks, open space and constricted space, warm and cool colours, fast and slow painting. It is the tensions that exist in the dialogue between these contrasts that underpin the potential for a sense of the uncanny to occur in viewing the painting Juncture.
In Ocularis (Fig. 67), the rectilinear form of the outer frame contains and defines entry to the space of the picture plane. From there, a system of membranes and openings appear in the form of curtaining and window frames, limiting and directing our view. Like the Smithson’s House of the Future (Fig. 68), a central core opening to the sky permits light and evokes a planetary connection. The pallid facial features suggest a perfection and oddness beyond the human, and as the green patterning of the figure’s torso shifts our view from surface to the inner core and back again, we become aware of the transitory nature of the figure, perhaps a visitor from beyond the ocular. This figure hovers on the periphery of the interior, neither inside nor outside but somewhere in-between. She is not looking at us as we look at her but rather observing something else, herself a voyeur. It appears that she occupies another viewing platform within the frame, riding the boundaries of the interior container but prevented from physically entering the interior space.

There is unease about the spaces depicted in this painting. The womb like containment of the inner room is sparsely furnished with signposts of an occupied domestic interior. A mirror reflects our gaze, floorboards recede, a coffee table holds nothing atop while a fireplace clad in crazy paving remains unit point toward the skylight, open to emit the anticipated smoke. Yet any sense of cozy inhabitation is then negated by the spectral presence of a holographic figure, little more than a disembodied head resembling a Stepford Wife denied entry to the interior by the skin of a suburban sheer curtain.

An ambition for the painting Ocularis was to incorporate the spatial complexities of the recent painting Juncture, within the boundaries of a smaller canvas. This was achieved through the construction of an initial ‘room’, giving the smaller canvas a sense of the greater pictorial space normally associated with the larger paintings. To irrupt a direct reading of the painted interior, it was obfuscated by a second interior, a corner where a sheer curtain intersects with a wall of red pattern. A large-scale figure sits at the surface, a body suggested by both a turquoise form emanating from the interior, and a repetitive green surface pattern. The dis-ease of the painting Ocularis is situated in the fabrication of an in-between spatial condition. A trace of malevolence loiters in the negotiation of these spatial complexities as the eye oscillates from the surface marks through an implied body to the interior and back again.
In the most recent paintings, research into painted interiority has resulted in architectural details, furniture and domestic objects transmogrifying into signposts of the corporeal. In Plumb (Fig. 69), drain pipes substitute where an arm might sit; their considered placement optically suggests spectral fingers emerging from an otherwise ambivalent background of brown marks. From a distance, the right angle of the pipes dominates, resembling a setsquare.

The title 'plumb' refers to both the function of the pipes but also to the ‘plumbing’ of art historical archives. The figure sits in a traditional portraiture pose, a ¾ turn of the body with the head looking directly out of the picture. The hair is grey, an anomaly for the young face so we question the gender of the figure. What initially seemed a young girl, could indeed be a young wigged male from the 18th century.

This awareness of temporality is emphasised in the pace of the painted marks. The eyes are painted in a photorealist style, a slow method of painting set against the quicker, more immediate mark making of the viridian green stripes. Tension lies in the compression of the space with the top stripes bearing down into the small frame. These stripes suggest a curtain shape, but the pattern emphasises the flatness of the surface of the painting. At the intersection of the green stripes with the neutral central form, a game of what is figure and what is ground is played out around the perimeter; the rawness of the green edge firstly sitting forward and then contrasting with darker, neater edging which retreats behind the odd ‘sunlit’ corner.

Up close, the figure begins to assert itself on a shallow stage. An awareness of detail reveals tiny teeth and lack of eyebrows, the fragile beauty echoed in the translucent paint application. The pastel blue form acts as a torso but bears the hallmarks of a quietly contemplative Morandi vase. This truncated ‘body’ then sits on top of watery brown horizontal marks. These marks declare themselves firstly as anthropomorphic fingers that then assemble into the form of a wood grained table.

Plumb is a deliberate synthesis of procedural approaches. Both material and subject were negotiated over a number of days. In the recent paintings Juncture and Ocularis, the strategy of figure/field reversal was operating within the deep space created within the picture plane. An intention for Plumb was to use the same strategies and techniques within a shallow picture plane. Although appearing to be less complex, the strategies of contrasting light against dark, saturated colour against the pale, texture against the flat, transparency versus the opaque combine to make the spatial conditions of Plumb as ambiguous as those of Juncture and Ocularis.

Figure 69 Kirsten Roberts, Plumb. 2013, oil on canvas, 610 x 760mm
Figure 70: Kirsten Roberts, Vestigial, 2013, oil on canvas, 710 x 915mm
CONCLUSION

This exegesis aimed to demonstrate how an investigation into the notion of interiority has impacted upon ways to consider a painting practice. Part One began with a focus on critical texts pertaining to architecture, the uncanniness of space and the interior. A corresponding practical response to these ideas in paint was shown alongside these understandings. A preliminary discussion outlined the work undertaken anterior to this project. Beatriz Colomina’s critique of Peter and Alison Smithson’s House of the Future, revealed the corruption of this idyllic home, apparent in its fabrication. The dissemination of the ideas around the House of the Future of self-containment and security in the face of exterior threats was shown in practical examples of work undertaken from 2006.

The introductory section on the beginnings of this Masters outlined how the paintings of this project were underpinned by a central notion: to situate the subject of the painting as something familiar and to introduce a disturbance. An explanation of how a personal interest in looking at home interiors in the media gave rise to the idea of painting interiority. These idealised homes of Western culture, clean and free from detritus gave the appearance of an idyllic world. Documentation illustrating the absence of the figure and the ubiquitous appearance of ‘home-staging’ in the representation of the domestic interior showed how this led to a feeling of unease. Looking to discussions by Anthony Vidler on the unhomely follows the emergence of the uncanny in the domestic interior. The potential affects upon the psyche of the peripheral boundaries of the domestic interior began into the thresholds and boundaries of the domestic interior. The potential affects upon the psyche of the peripheral boundaries of the domestic interior were addressed, particularly the overlooked corner. Jeanette Budgett’s examination of Petra Blaisse’s curtain designs revealed curtaining to be a territory rich in ideas of exposure and enclosure, performance and theatre.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Austrian neurologist, well known in the fields of Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis.

A personal interest in New Zealand modernism was outlined with an explanation of how modernist ideas around the opening up of the spatial divisions of the domestic interior began to shape the paintings of this project. The condition of a greater exteriority in these paintings was discussed along with the potential neuroses associated with a sense of open space.

Discussions by Beatriz Colomina on the architectural ideas of Le Corbusier showed the modernist beginnings of the blurring of the spaces of the interior and exterior, traversing the boundaries of the public and private. A reconsideration of the depiction of architecture within the painted space of the picture plane was explained by looking to Le Corbusier’s plan libre.

Research into an interior as subject drew to a close at the end of Part One, culminating in a discussion of a large six-panelled painting and resulting dissatisfaction with the realism of these works.

A shift was made, from research into subject, to an interrogation of the practice of painting. The division of practice into dual procedures, which had led to apparent dichotomies of subject matter, was given contextual reference. With the rise of the figure as subject, an examination of the differences between conventional portraiture and the particularities of the non-portrait paintings resulted. Studio research methods into the flattening of the picture plane through pattern and figure/field reversal strategies were illustrated through painted examples. Theoretical notions of the sublimation of the painted figure and the figure as a contemporary flaneur were explained as these outcomes materialised. The challenges inherent in the procedure of making the room paintings were discussed in paintings where their fabrication was evidenced in a slow realisation. A reference was made to the visual terrain of this project, showing works from other practitioners that look to the domestic realm and re-present levels of discomfort. Technique was shown to combine with theoretical ideas of irrupting the boundaries of inside and outside.

Following this, the eventual synthesis of procedure and subject matter was demonstrated as a response to the practical challenges of combining subject matter. The visual fragmentation of the figure and architectural detail was documented in association with conceptual ideas around absence and morselation of the body.

Three key paintings, Juncture, Oculair and Plumb were discussed in greater depth, detailing the ambitions for these works and their manifestation.
Colomina’s critique of the Smithson’s House of the Future as a false idyll has been articulated in paint through underlying spatial tensions and dichotomies overlaid with a web of recognition. Encapsulating familiar domestic items, these images are situated within an interior, but there appears a deterioration of visual containment. Walls often refuse to act as a spatial division; transparency allowing suggested architectural geometries to float freely in a space of no frontiers. Opening up the interior to the exterior, the private to the public, breaches visual boundaries of anticipated division.

These are paintings about spatial ambiguity. Paintings where a pathway is negotiated between what exists and what we believe to exist. Calculated degrees of opacity and transparency activate a slippage between the two-dimensional surface, and the three-dimensional depiction of space. The network of abstract forms and marks maintain an uneasy balance with modeled figuration, all the while engaged in a complex game of figure and field reversal. These intricacies may lead to aesthetic entanglement in the picture plane, keeping our view in constant motion.

The manifestation of these paintings demonstrates a re-engineering of the familiar through technique, content, and context. A conscious understanding of the history of painting forges new connections and dialogues in the way subject and technique are combined. The re-presentation of portraiture in the fabrication of these painted images holds us in a state of flux, an oscillation in our understandings of what portraiture was and what it is now. These figures are watchful and inert; bodies are made transparent or fragmented, rendering them elusive and insubstantial and at the same time, real.

A temporality is also evidenced in an awareness of the re-negotiation and material constitution of these fabricated interiors. While the totality of the image is apparent in a glance, consideration reveals a slow realisation of the image through the history of making. It is the layering and palimpsest of revision and over painting that draw attention to time. Fast and slow painting techniques within the same painting contribute to an experience of simultaneous acceleration and deceleration of time and movement. While the eye may vacillate between signposts of spatial dynamics in the picture plane, these remain calm paintings.

Weighting is given to painted contradictions, the contrasts of the flatness of the surface played against pictorial space, compression of depicted space against volume, light versus darkness, the known and the unknown. The tensions that exist between these contrasts create a dialogue of unease, a negation of the homely in viewing these paintings of interiority.

This investigation may contribute to understandings around the notion of interiority, viewed through the lens of the disciplines of architecture and interior design upon a painting practice: as both a spatial argument in the re-presentation of the interior as subject in a two-dimensional medium, and as a strategy in negotiating the convolutions of the daily practice of painting.
FIGURE REFERENCES

Figure 1. Peter and Alison Smithson, House of the Future. 1956, photo of the view from patio to kitchen. In Designmuseum.org, http://designmuseum.org/_/entry/4661/style=design_image_popup (accessed April 12, 2013).


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