

FROM CELLAR TO GARRET

*From cellar to garret she's swept all clean,
and now from the window she's peeping, I ween. 1*

The exhibition Room brings together artworks by seven artists from across Australia: Catriona Stanton (NWT), Katrina Simmons (SA), Kylie Stillman (Vic), Simon Horsburgh (Vic), Stephen Garrett (Vic), Kathryn Faludi Ball (Tas) and Matt Warren (Tas). Each artwork engages with the space of reception and together the artworks depict a room.

Situating artworks together in a context that derives from the 'sum of their parts' can bring new insights to the artworks exhibited, enabling fresh interpretation. As well as describing a physical, architectural space, the exhibition aims to evoke the private, psychological, interior space of subjectivity that is the site of our imagination and our dreams. To imagine, make-believe and be lost in thought are states of consciousness that we may readily slip into when in familiar surroundings. In a familiar domestic space of material reality, the imagined - animism, shadows, sorcery – can be either unnerving or, as a child's belief in the fantastic world of their own creation, desirous. But what about when familiar surroundings are not as expected?

Room is bare except for bits of stuff from the floor, the residue of presence, now on the wall. Not quite leaning against a wall, a standing broom is motionless but charged with the potential of animation, it may sweep into action. A recovered, burnt-out lightbulb glows, re-illuminated, its ghostly incandescence lighting the space around it. A delicate, winding stairwell climbs and then floats across the gallery space and its tiny scale evokes a child's presence. A Venetian blind is pulled closed to shut out the light but perforations allowing light through form the image of a tree outside. A flock of swallows mounted on the wall seem petrified whilst taking flight. Audible in a corner, 'angels' flit from wall to wall. Each artwork seems in some way enchanted, and symbolic of a conduit or portal: a common theme is that of passing from one space to another, a movement or shift into, through to, onto, and across to another space - a physical space, a subjective space, or even passing from one dimension to another, as if by magic.

The exhibition draws on concerns of installation art. Using a wide variety of media and operating across the boundaries of various disciplines, certain installation artworks are site-specific, where the relationship to location and context is a crucial focus, and others are recreated in different situations. Arranged towards the viewer's presence - so linked to the idea of theatrical space - and inviting interaction, installation art is geared towards first-hand experience. Activated spectatorship and the viewer being de-centred are key concepts. Critical appraisal of installation art looks to the discourse of the 1960s and 1970s, informed by theories of art pertaining to the viewer's physical, perceptual and psychological experience of the work. Immediate precursors of installation art were the 'environments' and 'happenings' of the late 1950s and 1960s, when artists developed the idea of an artwork as an environment that could be inhabited.

The exhibition Room consciously references an artwork of this period; Room by Lucas Samaras, a reconstruction of the artist's bedroom at Green Gallery New York in 1964. Discussed in 'Installation Art' by Claire Bishop:

"For Samaras, Room was authentically 'real in that it has real things and you can walk in, poke around, sit down and make love'. Psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis have explained that in the dream (or daydream) 'the scenario is basically in the first person... the subject lives out his reverie': this would be

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analogous to installation art of the type presented by Samaras, in which the viewer is protagonist." 2

The exhibition Room is physically immersive: the architectural space of the gallery - the door you enter through, the floor, walls, corners, ceiling - is implicated in the overall assemblage. The process of encountering this has an emphasis on sensorial experience organised around a phenomenological model of the viewing subject. Lighting in this context is not just to illuminate work but is a theatrical device to entice the viewer to move around the space. Viewers share the space with each other as well as with the artworks and a dialogue between the public space of the gallery and our private, subjective space makes connections between the cultural and the individual. Room is psychologically absorptive: the associative characteristics of 'found objects', used in most of the artworks, corresponds with that characteristic of dreams. Such associations may evoke memories in viewers, drawing connections between past and present. The experience is of the dialogues between individual artworks, the sum of the works in situ, the materiality of the space and the viewer's engaged presence. Formal, spatial and narrative relationships emerge between the artworks and across the space of reception as an overall sequence. The particular sensibility of each work is filtered through the exhibition as a whole.

In his 1958 book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard proposes an understanding of architecture informed by phenomenology. He considers the intimate spaces we live in and live with as being where the half-dreaming human consciousness he calls *reverie* resides: cellars, corners, nests, forests. He discusses the 'oneiric house' with its vertical polarity of cellar and attic, spaces that are conducive to daydreaming and to the dynamism of the creative imagination, spaces to which we return in dreams. The type of architectural space depicted in Room is a domestic one, including a broom, Venetian blinds, a lightbulb, and decorative, wall-mounted flying swallows (cast from an original made by English ceramic studio Beswick, popular in the 1950s). Each artwork in its own way addresses subjectivity: the poetics of the imagination, memory, psychic phenomena, belief, and creative thought and how it comes into being. Bachelard's ideas apply to this exhibition: that the familiarity of one's own domestic space is conducive to *reverie*, to flights of fancy, of make-believe, and can be a space as in a dream. Room could be a room in his 'oneiric house'.

To enter Room is to find a familiar domestic setting already made strange, dreamlike and uncanny. The artworks in Room are the type that provokes doubt and curiosity, raising questions relating to expectation, perception and how we understand the world. The uncanniness of the artworks and the immediacy of the immersive, speculative experience instill a heightened awareness of surroundings. Charged with unnerving or desirous animism, shadows and sorcery, Room is recognisable as analogous to the psychological, interior space of subjectivity that is the site of our imagination and our dreams.

In his 1919 paper *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud explained the uncanny as certain things relative to that which induces fear.

"...the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar". 3

He gives as an example the doubt whether an apparently animate being is alive or whether an inanimate object might actually have come to life. He also relates the uncanny to the theme of the Sand-Man:

"...a wicked man who comes when children won't go to bed and throws handfuls of sand in their eyes so that they jump out of their heads all bleeding. Then he puts the eyes in a sack and carries them off to the half-moon to feed his children. They sit up

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there in their nest, and their beaks are hooked like owls' beaks, and they use them to peck up naughty boys' and girls' eyes with". 4

Freud also discusses the German word heimlich, which means belonging to the house, familiar, friendly, intimate, not strange, etc. It is also used to describe a place free from ghostly influences. Its opposite is unheimlich.

"Everything is unheimlich that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light". 5

In Fitcher's Bird by the Brothers Grimm, the evil wizard Fitcher is seeking a young bride. One after the other he captures three sisters, takes them to his house and puts them to a test: do not enter the forbidden room! The first two fail this test and get chopped up. The third and brightest of the three outwits Fitcher and saves the day - her sisters are made whole again. Is the exhibition Room the forbidden room in Fitcher's house? Or is it a room in Bachelard's 'oneiric house'? Is it the cellar or the attic? Both the Sand-Man and Fitcher scare listening children in their rooms at story time. In children's vivid imaginations, reality and the fantastical blur to become magical. They love it. It's unheimlich.

Curator's essay by Derek Hart.

- 1 The Brothers Grimm, Fitcher's Bird.
- 2 Claire Bishop, Installation Art.
- 3, 4, 5 Sigmund Freud, The Uncanny.

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