Keeping up appearances: a photographic investigation into the theatricality of the suburban domestic interior

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Abstract

A photograph of a domestic interior is a source of fascination in that it offers viewers a window into an environment, which is considered private, encouraging the desire to investigate the occupants' identities. At the same time however, this desire is frequently frustrated by the ways in which domestic environments are carefully constructed to conceal rather than reveal the true identity of their inhabitants.

Using photographic documentation of constructed life-size home interiors I explore this conundrum, highlighting how the viewers' assessment of these spaces can be manipulated through theatrical devices, resulting in varying interpretations. If we consider the domestic environment like a theatre, particular areas of the home are presented as 'centre stage' such as the living rooms, whereas areas such as bathrooms and bedrooms become the 'backstage, dressing rooms'. This creates layers of social behavior, allowing the people or occupant(s) to manipulate what is presented to public view as a representation of their identities. The people living in these environments are actors on a domestic stage.

Within the field of this research I have paid particular attention to artists who interrogate the construction of the domestic environment. Photographers Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Angela Strassheim and Anne Zahalka have been examined because of their elaborate construction methods and investigation into the domestic, suburban space. Edgar Degas is also a primary influence examined in my research, due to the way he portrays people in their private interiors. In addition, I have looked at the work of Alfred Hitchcock, in particular the film, *Rear Window* because of his emphasis on the voyeuristic gaze into private interiors, his approach to set design and the creation of a visual narrative.

The works for my project are created through a purpose built set, redecorated for each photographic shoot. I use the analogy of a life-sized doll's house and the models as an assortment of dolls positioned to 'play house'. The environments created are emphatic in their over-ornamentation. They represent an obsessive act of collecting and reassembling discarded second-hand ornaments and décor items in an attempt to reorder and revitalise their histories. The work relies on the slippage between the real and artifice, as models play families and three sheets of MDF become a room.

Acknowledgments

Contents

Introduction

A photograph of a domestic interior is a source of fascination. The intimate nature of this space offers the viewer a window into an environment, which is perceived to be private, encouraging the desire to investigate an individual's personal life. The domestic space may vary aesthetically but the practicalities of the home evoke a familiarity as a shared experience. An understanding of the domestic surroundings invites the viewer not only to analyze what is depicted, but also to see beyond, engendering narratives evoked through association with memories of the home.

The domestic space has historically been placed within the female domain. Rather than a place merely in which to be sheltered, bathed and fed, it is a sanctuary from the public gaze and a representation of a household's wants, desires and aspirations. Although this space is essentially considered private, it can still be viewed for judgment and enquiry by friends and family. To shield against this, domestic interiors are typically organized and decorated in such a way as to not reveal too much about the identity of their occupants. The décor can operate as a mask or façade for 'keeping up appearances'. The modern home has evolved to accommodate changed family structures, economic factors and cultural diversity yet many ideas associated with the traditional domestic realms of the past still exist, albeit adapted to suit contemporary life.

The central aim of this project is to find a visual language that will allow me to investigate the theatrical nature of the domestic interior and the possible associations and memories created by décor. I have conducted this investigation by constructing artificial domestic environments and photographing them. These interiors include people who don't quite 'fit' into the environment in which they have been placed. By presenting a fabricated interior with unrelated occupants the viewer is encouraged to use their own experience in evaluating what they see and formulate their own judgments and interpretation of the story behind the rooms.

The modeling of a domestic environment or "making a home" is happening constantly and is never static. Hilde Heynen describes it as a feminine quality of "the caring for things invested in memories or cultural

significance, the transmittance of private meanings and values to the next generation, the continuous arranging and rearranging of the necessities for daily life, the performance of family ritual and act of emotional bonding."[1] The repetitive action of creating this environment has been likened to the modeling of a shell by a sea dwelling creature.[2] It is a continuous process that is never finished. I am interested in the cyclic and repetitive nature of our domestic life, in the reflection of long and short-term personal history. Through the re-building and modeling of living spaces for the creation of my work I have been able to further explore how we continually invent and reinvent our domestic lives.

A significant influence for this Masters' submission is the childhood experience of growing up in 1970's suburban Australia, in particular Scarborough in Perth, Western Australia. My parents bought a 1960's bungalow style house, close to Scarborough Beach after my father was offered a lecturing job at the University of Western Australia. Scarborough was affordable on an academic's wage and offered a relaxed beach lifestyle for the family. My mother also studied but primarily looked after the home and us. Although working with moderate means my mother was interested in atmosphere and décor within the home and would regularly rearrange furniture, paintings and ornaments in the quest for a more harmonious assemblage. I recall a story my mother told me about when she lived in a small flat with my brother before I was born. She had been given a decorative tin of biscuits as a house-warming present and when the tin was empty she displayed it on the mantel, because she liked the image on the tin and wanted to visually warm up the appearance of her living environment. A visitor commented on this choice with obvious derision and hence this became a memorable and hurtful incident. The tin became a vehicle for that memory, attaching emotion to the object.

My father would regularly be given ornaments and pictures from overseas students and these objects would also be positioned around the home. From a child's perspective, I viewed these objects as magical. They represented an imagined world of the exotic. I remember staring at the top of a Balinese

1 Heynen, H. Baydar, G. (2005) *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in Modern architecture*, Routledge, London, New York, Pp 20.
2 Rybczynski, W. (1986) *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Penguin Books, USA

doll where our cat had chewed the glitter away to reveal the clear plastic it was made from. It is these memories that contribute to my interest in objects and décor that may not carry monetary value but are talismanic in terms of their associations and memories.

Due to my father's work, my parent's peers were highly educated and generally came from privileged backgrounds, whereas my parents grew up in Coburg, a working class suburb of Melbourne. This is alluded to in the title 'Keeping up Appearances'. Originally, this term related to a person hiding a loss of financial status by maintaining a particular lifestyle even when it was beyond their means and merely a façade. I relate the idea of *keeping up appearances* to my parents fitting into a new world, one which was concerned with academic advancement and intellectual pursuits, while not wanting to reveal their working class background. In the context of this project the title relates to the construction of domestic interiors to project a desirable image of its inhabitants. While those interiors are presented as 'real' they are in fact highly fabricated. My aim is to reveal the 'fake' nature of these interiors by providing clues which disrupt their apparent realism. By using an invented space, evaluations of the people occupying the space become ironic as they are based upon a deception or fabrication of the environment in which they are placed. Whilst I have taken great care with the formal elements, such as colour and arrangement, there is also a sense of the makeshift seen in the rippled wallpaper and less than perfect finishes to these spaces. I am intentionally playing with the slippage between real and artifice, public and private. By allowing the viewer obvious clues to the work's construction I am referencing the process of modelling an interior of a home whilst also conveying its fragility and artificiality. Photographs of these spaces act as a representation of the suburban domestic environment rather than a real document of a room.

When embarking on this project, I began searching for the domestic environment documented within family photo albums. I was surprised to find that there were very few photographs containing much information or detail of this. I found numerous images of my siblings and myself in various stages of childhood, fashioning a new outfit or school uniform. My mother, the family photographer, usually positioned us in front of curtains or walls. The point of this photo was for my mother to document an important time

Figure 01: Example of photographs from my family albums

in our lives wearing our 'best' clothes. The need to include any record of domestic space within the home appeared to be unimportant within this documentation. A solid colour of curtain provides a simple backdrop so as to not distract from the intentions of the photographer, to record her offspring but not her home. The fact that many of these images were taken from the 1970s onwards meant that the technology (i.e. cameras) had become very accessible and simple to use, removing the awkwardness of photography of the past. Quick poses as you head out of the door, flash, and you're done. Gone were the days of standing around for lengthy periods of time trying to keep still. This also meant that less attention was paid to the environment in which the subject was placed as the photographer was not spending hours setting up tripods, framing and composing and re-arranging scenes for the purpose of a flattering portrayal of the family and the home.

Within these albums, any actual detail of my home surroundings were almost unrecorded, with few exceptions such as occasional pictures of children's parties or events such as Christmas Day. These images were generally centred around the table, focusing on family and friends and possibly a birthday cake or ritual feast of some kind.

Figure 02: Example of photographs from my family albums

Figure 03: Examples of photographs from relative's album

I looked further a-field, delving into the photo albums of other older relatives and friends. This investigation also revealed little evidence of depictions of house interiors. I found many photos of exotic places, beaches, holidays and people standing in front of cars and houses or completely posed studio shots which depict a constructed studio environment. This led to the conclusion that the domestic environment was not considered a significant or a worthy subject to warrant being documented in family photographs.

Privacy is a matter of primary concern; a photograph is an object that can become a public document at any moment. This may explain the absence of photographs depicting the home. Rather than allowing a photograph to be a window into someone's private living arrangements, an anonymous part of the house is chosen so as not to reveal anything of the owner's identity or private living environment. A clotheshorse with airing laundry, dirty dishes at the sink or a rug needing vacuuming may reveal more than the homeowner or occupant wishes known. Most people have experienced a frenetic clean up of their house, before the arrival of friends or family, so as to project pride in how they live. The home is considered a representation of their values and achievements. This could provide a possible explanation for the lack of domestic environments revealed in photo albums, as not many people would have the time or inclination to 'spring clean' before taking a family snap in their house.

During the process of taking my own family snapshots, I have become aware of my own self-consciousness of what I am portraying to others. For example, when photographing my young son in various developmental stages I became aware of the glowing illumination of the television screen in the background and sought to exclude this from the photos. In excluding the television my primary concern was to project an image of a household where television did not play a central role.

During my childhood my parents often would visit 'open homes' around my neighborhood. Although there was the genuine intention of considering the purchase of a new home, in retrospect, the process of viewing potential living spaces allowed my parents to project a fantasy onto what living in this house would be like, including how it could be transformed and improved. It could also be considered as a way of gauging how other people live with a sense of compare and contrast. As a child, the experience was purely visual, for example I remember a house that contained a different wallpaper mural in every room, a rain forest in one room and a waterfall in another. To me it was a wonderland but I was aware of the amused shock of my parents albeit contained within an air of politness.

Figure 04: Open House in Hobart

As a part of my research I have visited open homes during this project and have been surprised but somehow reassured that the experience of looking into peoples' homes can evoke such a mixture of emotions. Having no interest in buying the home I felt fraudulent in my enquiry, yet aware that I was not the only one merely looking around out of curiosity alone. I also had conversations with people as to what might be the story behind particular arrangements of furniture and the significance of ornaments. This experience served to reinforce my hypothesis regarding peoples interest in the domestic home and how its presentation can influence the formulation of a narrative surrounding the occupants' identity; taking into account, that in the case of 'open homes' things may have been manipulated by owners or real-estate agents to encourage potential buyers. It is another example of a theatrical contruct as if entering the set of a stage play without the script or actors. I have included documentation of one of the homes I explored. This home gave the appearance of the owners maintaining a decor from a particular era that remained unchanged.[3]

Figure 05: Documentation of 'open house' viewed in Hobart

I began to formulate what I felt represented a home interior. This was by using experiences of visiting open homes, collecting nostalgic home decorating publications and general life experience of homes in my past. It included childhood memories and homes from my adult life, including numerous rental spaces that I chose to occupy. I began to explore the theatrical nature of our domestic interiors and built my own life-size rooms to contain these constructs which I photographed.

The collection of roll upon roll of carpets, wallpaper and obscure objects such as wax candle cats and deer scene lamps obtained from second hand resources, became the palette I used in the creation of each image. While experiencing some self-consciousness when purchasing these things, the inherent ugliness or strangeness diminished as they would often be admired by a fellow shopper or sales staff. This was replaced by a mild guilt when acknowledging my sense of superiority in the collection of things I considered kitsch in the 'higher' purpose of art, rather than to

3 This particular example was also used as a backdrop to an earlier series discussed in the background section. A series that positioned brides in front of houses that gave the appearance of being trapped in an era. Viewing this interior was suprisingly accurate in terms of what I imagined.

display in my own home.

It was ironic that the cyclic nature of taste and fashion meant that items I was collecting were simultaneously becoming popular and desirable again and being sold in fashionable urban stores to people who also admired their kitsch sensibility.

Whether it was smelly smoke ridden carpet, plastic flowers or a cluster of side tables, these objects were accumulated to represent a domestic space. If I could combine them in an installation that when documented, would convince a viewer that it was an image of a domestic interior, then I had achieved what people do in their real homes every day. The façade would be complete.

Background

My interest in household interior spaces and what constitutes a home surfaced a number of years ago through a body of work which explored houses as containers, culminating in a collection of photographs that shared common attributes of kitsch and suburbia. Each house depicted remained
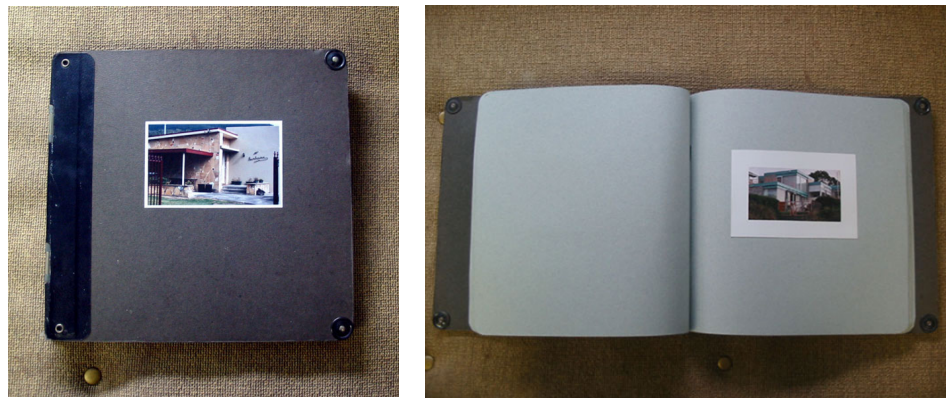
Figure 06: Ledger Book of Houses (2006) Nicole Robson

true to its original style and time with eerie perfection. My personal reaction was that these houses evoked a sense of 'something sinister going on behind closed doors'. This work was presented in a found ledger book to suggest it was a collection of evidence for later reference.

In my next photographic series I imagined the original female occupants for each of the selected houses. In order to create works that explored

less of the suburban domesticity but rather the perceived journeys of these imagined women, I introduced 'impostor brides'[4]. The brides were positioned outside the houses previously photographed and, like my latest series, they lacked the usual accoutrements of a new bride; their hair was unkempt and they had inappropriate footwear. Positioned in the foreground, their poses were confrontational yet suggested vulnerability as they gazed directly into the camera.

Figure 07: great expectations (2006) C-type Prints, Nicole Robson

While these works depicted the exterior of houses in my Honours project, the focus shifted from the exterior to the interior. The "brides" were now photographed in the context of domestic rooms which I constructed. The decor resembled what one could imagine existed within the house of the previous series. Using nostalgia, the rooms remain trapped in time, suggesting a metaphor that the brides were also trapped in a transitional phase from adolescent life to adulthood.

The process of creating these rooms resembled the childhood practice of constructing and decorating a dolls house where everything has expanded to life-size. Using the illusionary techniques of the application of wallpaper, and props such as curtains, table lamps and other decorative items of the domestic environment fostered a contrived atmosphere for unnatural domestic settings. The brides were also doll-like, accentuated by their controlled positioning and unconvincing attire.

4 An 'impostor' bride is a term established to summarise the artificiality of the subjects in the context of real brides.

Figure 08: Example of set construction for great expectations 2, 2007 and Photographs from Honours project, great expectations 2, 2007

There is a continuation of a doll's house aesthetic within this current photographic series for my Masters submission. It is interesting to note that dolls houses were of little interest in my own childhood where I fell into the role of 'Tomboy'. As a child I rebelled against traditional feminine 'nesting instincts'. The current project allows me to reinvestigate these instincts from an adult perspective, using the techniques of make believe and role-play. While the subjects within these environments are less doll-like, there is a similar sense of apprehension and awkwardness attributed to their existence within these artificial domestic environments.

I have divided this exegesis into three chapters. The first chapter examines the theatrical nature of the home, its relationship to privacy and how it functions as a façade or mask to manipulate the occupants' identity aided by consumer culture and availability of mass produced décor. Building a historical time line addressing developments within society that led to the evolution of the domestic environment in the 21st Century, prompted me to establish the point at which the home became a private dwelling, used for leisure rather than work. This was also when the home began to be used as a way of projecting the desired image of its occupants.

The second chapter discusses the context of my work within a range of artistic fields, including painting, film and photography. An emphasis within this chapter is placed on works with themes of fabrication and construction both as a physical method of creative production and as a conceptual concern in relationship to the domestic environment. I begin with impressionist painter Edgar Degas, concentrating on the influence photography had on his work in terms of composition and subject matter, which included private spaces and the idea of the viewer as voyeur. This is followed by a discussion on how the film, *Rear Window*, by Alfred Hitchcock, relates to both stylistic characteristics within my work and the use of interior settings that resemble theatre sets allowing us a view into the private domestic lives of their occupants. I conclude this chapter with four contemporary artists working within the field of photography who use fabrication and construction to create their images with the intention of interrogating the artifice of both domestic space and the relationship of people within these environments.

The third chapter examines the formal aspects of my work and the progression of its development. This includes the use of a purpose built set, the use of natural lighting as evidence of artifice, colour association, décor, nostalgia and the role of the models in relationship to their environment. I also discuss the development of the research project and its impact on my ideas and presentation. The chapter closes with the rationale for my final presentation.

In my conclusion I discuss the project's contribution to the field and its successes and short comings in achieving my central aim.

Chapter 1: Origins of Domesticity

The Home as Theatre

Home is often described with words such as sanctuary, refuge or haven, especially when one is comparing it to the outside, often work oriented or public space. It is this broad generalisation of the home being private while the greater environment is public that raises the question 'is the home really a private space?'.

As Witold Rybcynski discusses in *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, the development of private space for the family unit is a relatively modern arrangement. Western society didn't consider the idea of privacy in the home important until the 19th Century. As the need for privacy increased and changed so did the structures of living spaces. A degree of separation occurred between what was available to be viewed by outsiders and what remained hidden, only to be seen by those dwelling in the space.

The metaphor of back stage versus centre stage, dressing rooms and galleys is referred to by Tony Chapman, Jenny Hockey and Martin Wood in the book, *Ideal Homes: Social Change and Domestic Life*, where they discuss the performative element of a home.

> The idea that people present a 'front' to the world which may conceal much from the observer is an important idea because it exposes several layers of social behaviour, from the physical 'stage set' where the performance takes place, to the deeply embedded spoken and unspoken behaviour patterns of the actors. While the home may provide people with a site of retreat from the public gaze, it is also the stage upon which people project the most intimate image of their 'selves' to the world.[5]

This masking of domestic interiors began in the Victorian era when men left the home to work rather than working from the home. Leaving their

5 quoted in Rybczynski, W. (1986) *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Penguin Books, USA, P.195

wives and family to organise the home, a new emphasis was introduced where the home became a sanctuary away from work for the man and a representation of his and his family's positioning within their society. The 'housewife' now had the responsibility of impressing their guests with an environment which was not only inviting but stimulating. This is described by Mike Hepworth in his article, 'Privacy, Security and Respectability', where he quotes Halttunen's description of the middle class Victorian woman's aims for the presentations of public, entertainment areas of her home.

> The right furniture was thought to ease social intercourse, by helping visitors to look their best, and when correctly arranged, by encouraging circulation. Similarly, the hostess who tastefully arranged potted shrubs, plants and flowers throughout the room helped 'brighten' and 'enliven' the company by placing them in an 'almost fairy-like scene.' In addition she selected and displayed the 'curiosities, handsome books, photographs, engravings, stereoscopes, medallions and any works of art you may own,' which were the staged properties of polite social intercourse. Such conversation pieces, according to one etiquette manual, were the good hostess armour against stupidity.' The polite Victorian hostess was not simply an actress in the genteel performance; she was also a stage manager, who exercised great responsibility for the performance of everyone who entered her parlour.[6]

Figure 09 A French Drawing room of 1820, Lithograph from Le Garde-Meuble

6 Chapman, T.,Hockey, J.(1999) *Ideal Homes? Social Change and Domestic Life*, Routledge, London, New York, P.24

This description not only demonstrates the expectations placed upon middle-class Victorian women but also the significance of décor and ornaments as theatrical devices used in a carefully arranged construction of their home. Any evidence of day-to-day life or even of family was considered common-place and mundane and was left in the hands of governesses and servants hidden away in another room of the house, thereby creating a polished façade of life within the home and allowing for an appropriate assessment of their status within polite society.

Today we still invite guests into a sitting room, a space which generally exists as the most well presented room, one which remains tidy at all times and ready for prying eyes at any moment. Areas that have any functional purpose such as bathing, preparing food or sleeping are kept separate, back stage allowing the host/hostess of the home to move privately behind the scenes while also not allowing visitors easy visual or physical access to these areas through architectural design, such as corridors, walls, screens and doors. This is described by Erving Goffman in his publication *The Presentation of Self*, where he details the conditions under which individuals enact social roles within their domestic space.

> There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props. There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage and in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the performed character's self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretative activity will be necessary for this emergence.[7]

This set-like quality of the home was emphasised in the decoration of domestic interiors of the 1950s as they became increasingly commodified. The influence of the commercial market through advertising images, store displays and exhibition homes, encouraged the culture of striving for happiness through pride in your home. One example of this is the Honeymoon cottages built in the United States. These spaces were created to imitate a small version of future 'domestic bliss'. They consisted of rooms designed to evoke the feelings of the marital home, often with split levels, raising bathrooms and bedrooms and lowering living rooms, as they

7 Heynen, H. Baydar, G. (2005) *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in Modern architecture*, Routledge, London, New York, P. 104

were described 'sunken rooms'. The cottages' theatrical characteristics were further exaggerated in the 1960s and 70s with raised platforms for beds and sunken or elevated baths. The variety of levels combined with the built-in elements such as fireplaces, beds, baths and open vistas of large front windows, gave the cottages a distinctly staged feel. Lyn Spiegel discusses the comparison between these suites with the mass production of suburban houses and their theatricality in an article where she argues that they were "modelled on notions of everyday life as a form of theatre."[8] This was further reinforced by what she notes as "home manuals, magazines and advertisements, that treated the home as a showcase, recommending ways to create glamorous backgrounds on which to enact spectacular scenes."[9] Display homes were designed to entice a potential buyer to visualise themselves living perfect lives in perfect homes. There was little inclusion of practical/work life in these spaces as they were designed to project a fantasy which did not include the practical day-to-day life. The display home was a theatrical construction, providing the viewer with a platform to stage their desires unhindered by the demands of work and encouraging the public into material consumption .

Figure 10: 1950's decorating magazine advertisment

8 Heynen, H. Baydar, G. (2005) *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in Modern architecture*, Routledge, London, New York, P. 110
9 Heynen, H. Baydar, G. (2005) *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in Modern architecture*, Routledge, London, New York, P. 111

Similarly the décor magazine exists as a glorified shopping catalogue demonstrating a clean and perfect way to present one's home. Images of ways of decorating rooms, types of flooring, furniture and other objects of desire come together to form a perfect environment in which to live, as designated by a team of marketing and design consultants. This projection of desire creates an illusion to the viewer that if these goods and services are purchased, not only will one's life be enriched, but others will also perceive it to be better. The use of professional photographers, designers and writers allows a seamless portrayal of a domestic fantasy. A space that has no mess, with nothing out of place evokes a sense of a higher standard of living and allows us to daydream about what could be instead of the real complexities of living.

Figure 11: A variety of décor publications dating from the 1970s - 2010

The idealised depictions of domestic space in lifestyle magazines and display homes for the purpose of economic gain, fosters a society that is in constant pursuit of the perfect home. To be reminded of realities relating to day-to-day life would not be conducive to the overall aim of selling a fantasy of an improved life. As Tony Chapman states in his chapter, 'Stage sets for ideal lives: Show homes': 'If people choose to consume goods in the hope that they will have a better life, they would not want to see medicines on view in the bathroom, terry nappies soaking in the utility room or a Zimmer frame in the hall. It is from objects such as these that the show room viewer wishes to escape."[10] What we present to outside viewers, whether a visiting guest or a photograph of home sent to friends and family, is a representation constructed to present a particular viewpoint or identity. Within this presentation reality is disguised for the purpose of idealising the space being exposed.

From a feminine perspective, the idea of a mask or façade is often used as a metaphor for deception or concealment as in the act of wearing makeup and various signs associated with manner of dress or clothing. The mask analogy is similar to specific formal decorative characteristics found in the home. A mask is not only a theatrical device laden with signs but can also conceal the truth. The hidden truths are dependent on the individual and their cultural values. In Laura J. Miller's article 'Denatured domesticity: An account of femininity and physiognomy in the interiors of Frances Glessner Lee' writes:

> In the very act of constructing domestic space, what is 'natural' is eschewed in favour of the culturally scripted...The material culture of the domestic interior provides evidence of how the occupants wish to be recognised...aided and abetted by artefacts and décor that codify and embellish not only the domestic setting, but significantly, the stories being told.[11]

10 Chapman, T.Hockey, J.(1999) 'Stage sets for ideal lives: Show homes in *'Ideal Homes? Social Change and Domestic Life*, Routledge, London, New York, P. 56

11 Miller quoted in Heynen, H. Baydar, G. (2005) *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in Modern architecture*, Routledge, London, New York, P. 198

The idea of home life being compared to an orchestrated theatre performance has reached new levels of exaggeration in the 21st Century as we increasingly expose the domestic environment to the public gaze.

Reality television shows such as *Big Brother* and internet phenomena such as social networking sites *My Space* and *Facebook*, invites the outside world directly into our private domestic lives, with use of the web cameras and the uploading of photos and videos. This suggests that the ability to keep our home life private is becoming progressively less desirable and more difficult. However, these images of home and life can also be easily manipulated, edited and constructed in order to present a particular representation of our identity.

Figure 12: Live still from Big Brother Australia

The premise of reality television is to enable the viewing audience an extended glimpse into everyday lives of people who are not actors or performers following set scripts. The popularity of shows such as *Big Brother* demonstrates increased interest in gaining permission to voyeuristically watch people in a domestic environment. Although reality television suggests that what we are watching is a depiction of a real everyday environment, it is questionable how naturalistic these presentations of life are. On *Big Brother*, the 'house' in which the participants are living is a highly designed set decorated to resemble a domestic living environment.

Documented by multiple cameras and lights capturing every private moment of the participants, the public presentation is predetermined by program directors who instigate particular activities. This material is edited and relayed to a television audience to be perceived as reality. The manipulation of such programs further demonstrates the theatrical presentation of the domestic environment supporting an idealised form.

Figure 13: Publicity Shot from Big Brother USA

Kitsch and domesticity

The understanding of kitsch and its relationship to the domestic environment is of fundamental significance to my investigations. Once I established that I rely heavily on a kitsch aesthetic within my work, further investigation clarified that there are intrinsic values shared by both kitsch and the domestic environment.

The masking of our domestic environment has survived many manifestations. If we look at the minimal, modernist aesthetic of the early 20th century, domestic environments were stripped back to their simplest form. By removing all ornamentation and relying on the clean lines of Modernist architects, the occupant's identity was completely concealed. White walls became the ultimate mask, revealing nothing of the occupant's private life to any outside observers. This purity of domestic décor became popular as a rejection of the frivolity of previous eras. By removing all non-functional decoration the supposition was that the occupants of this environment would reach a higher intellectual state without the distractions of the past. Things that could hold cobwebs or dust represented nostalgia and old ideas rather than new thought. By associating this aesthetic with a higher state of being, anything that fell outside these ideals was considered trivial or superfluous. The highly decorative motifs of the past fell into the category of kitsch.

When describing Modernism in architecture and design, it is often gendered as masculine, with associations being made with the style's practicality, bold strong lines and lack of ornamentation or unnecessary detailing. Modernism was seen as having a higher cultural status than mass culture, which engaged sentimentality and nostalgia so often associated with the

Figure 14: An example of a kitsch object: A plastic Rococo inspired mirror from my collection

feminine. This relegated domesticity to a position of lower importance as it was considered a product of mass culture and consumption, which was said to have a 'homogenising effect on modernisation.'[12] Christopher Reed discusses the 'undomestic' core of Modernism through its association with the avant-garde in his introduction to *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity and Architecture*.

> As its military-derived name suggests, the avant-garde (literally "advance guard") imagined itself away from home, marching towards glory on the battlefields of culture…From the Victorian drawing-room with its etageres full of trinkets to the twentieth century tract house with mass-produced paintings, the home has been positioned as the antipode to high art. Ultimately, in the eyes of the avant-garde, being undomestic came to serve as a guarantee of being art.[13]

If we consider that Modernism developed in reaction to previous ideas of architecture, art and décor from the Victorian era, where woman were guardians of the home while men provided the financial support, this also meant suburban architecture was an environment dominated by a feminine aesthetic. In order to reject the past it could be seen that men were attempting to regain authority within this space, which meant rejecting all that it stood for and represented, modernism being the antithesis of homeliness. Witold Rybczynski in his book *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, examines this in his discussion on Adolf Loos' 1908 manifesto, "Loos equates ornament with crime, arguing that the tendency to decorate manifested the same impulse as graffiti and tattooing, and that all were symptoms of degeneration, inappropriate to forward-looking modernism."[14]

Despite the attempts made by Modernism to 'raise' the standards of public taste, the practicalities of daily life and society's needs for both psychological and physical comfort out-weighed the intellectual drive for forward thinking. Such elegant austerity was kept strongly fixed within a high cultural domain; grouping everything else with mass taste and its

12 Reed, C. (1996) *Not At Home: The Suppression of Domesticity In Modern Art and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, London, Introduction
13 Heynen, H. Baydar, G. (2005) *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial productions of gender in Modern architecture*, Routledge, London, New York, P 24
14 Rybczynski, W. (1986) *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, Penguin Books, USA

association with low culture. Within the home, people rejected the pure ideals of modernism in favour of their family histories and objects charged with cultural meaning.

Not only are kitsch items often showcased within the home, along with the decorative domestic environment, kitsch has and is still met with derision and mockery. When proposing a definition of kitsch, Tomas Kulka in his book *Kitsch and Art* offers three conditions, which help to define this term.

> 1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
> 2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.
> 3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.[15]

Examples of things that fall into the category of kitsch range from pictures of sunsets and Swiss alps, clowns, kittens and pastoral deers in a forest clearing to a plastic glowing Jesus, velvet pictures of Elvis or depictions of galloping horses.

Figure 15: Examples of objects considered kitsch from my collection

15 Kulka, T. (1996) *Kitsch and Art,* The Pennsylvania State University Press, USA

It is important at this point to distinguish art and objects which are considered kitsch from art that uses or comments on the kitsch aesthetic. Many contemporary artists have engaged with kitsch as an aesthetic, such as Jeff Koons and Pierre et Gilles. However if we refer to Kulka's second condition it is obvious that elements within this work are not instantly recognisable or easily understood. Why for example would Jeff Koon's puppy be so large? By making something that is usually small and cute gigantic causes it to become grotesque. Due to its startling scale, you could not fit it inside a home. In Pierre et Gilles's overly ornamented photographic portraits they use a camp aesthetic which overstates the subject's beauty and sexuality. Even so it is highly probable that these works would not be common (even in reproduction) in the average suburban home.

Although these artworks share attributes associated with kitsch, the artists' understanding and intention of what contributes to this aesthetic becomes an imitation and reflection on a kitsch piece of art, rather than it actually being kitsch. In order for kitsch to exist in its true form there must be a lack of consciousness on the part of the owner of the art or object, that is it is not being purchased for its kitsch appeal. Often these objects are regarded as comforting and familiar as they offer no confusion or greater insight other than what they are and reinforce the association of kitsch with art that is low in artistic merit.

The recent trend of collecting artefacts that fall into a category of kitsch, often reveals a process that in itself involves elements of superiority on the part of the collector. To categorise objects as kitsch with the idea that they are tacky or ugly, suggests that those who consider such objects as aesthetically appropriate for their homes without irony but merely love them for their beauty are being mocked. Kitsch relies on mass culture to determine what is fashionable one moment then soon after, passé. It is culturally specific and the factors that decide if an object is kitsch are always shifting. For this reason defining and agreeing upon what constitutes kitsch is hard to determine.

I have used decor and objects that I consider kitsch as these items have imbedded stories and memories from their original owners. An ornament of an owl made of shells has a gaudiness that may be considered unappealing,

yet if the original owner bought it to remember a trip to Tahiti, it is the memories of this trip that are evoked. Once discarded, these associations are lost. If I then place this object in the centre of a coffee table in one of my constructed living rooms, I am attempting to restore its value. It is not merely an ugly object amongst a shelf of discarded bric-a-brac in an opportunity shop, it has position again that restores its value and ownership.

In my work I have used various objects that are considered kitsch for various reasons, however a predominant theme that became evident throughout the work was the use of 'staged' nature. Whether it be a plastic flower suspended in a water filled glass dome, deer lamps, wax cats, terrariums of fake birds or a painting of mountains, oceans or sunsets, placed in the suburban interior they become symbols of escapism, of bringing the outside in. These objects are poor replicas of actual nature and are in an environment that is far from their origins. They become ironic in that they are *un-natural*.

Figure 16: Example of an nature based object considered Kitsch from my collection

In the next chapter I will discuss artistic material that has had influence on my studio work. This will include formal elements such as composition, colour and construction as a method of production and conceptual components including themes of the domestic and its theatrical associations.

Chapter 2: Context

In my preliminary investigations into the field in which this project is positioned, I quickly established that the area of domesticity in art was extremely broad. In order to contain my research I have divided the chapter into two sections. In section one I have focused on two contrasting media, painting and film; genres that have influenced my own practice and more expansively, presented depictions of domesticity that have influenced western society's perceptions of domesticity and the home. Firstly I will look at the painting of the French Impressionist, Edgar Degas. One of the characteristics of Impressionism involved a shift in the selection of subject matter, moving away from subjects that were allegorical in nature, portraying status and wealth to instead depict the everyday, which included the domestic environment. Edgar Degas was of particular interest within my research due to his interest in photography and how that influenced his work and, more importantly, his voyeuristic viewpoint of the private lives of ordinary people. The second half of this section discusses Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* in reference to its specific influence on my masters submission including the influence of film on photography.

In section two, I examine photographers who address shared concerns about the constructed nature of the domestic environment and the relationship that photography plays in its depiction. The photographers selected also have a common interest in the human subjects within these environments and their connections with their surroundings, each other and the viewer. These contemporary photographers are investigating concepts related to domesticity and everyday life, using formal techniques of fabrication and construction to make their images. The artists I have chosen to examine are Jeff Wall, Geoffrey Crewdson, Anne Zahalka and Angela Strassheim.

Section 1: Edgar Degas' Interiors

Edgar Degas, one of the forefathers of Impressionism, is of particular interest, because of his attraction to the everyday domestic environments of private dwellings and for his use of formal techniques including perspective, compositional cropping and viewpoint.

He was known to experiment with the creation of actual photographic works that mainly consisted of constructed portraits of friends and artistic peers. However, it was how the formal qualities and techniques used by photography impacted on his painting and drawings that is of interest within my research. The use of cropping and unusual viewpoints can be attributed directly to this influence. This technique not only allowed the artist to present a fresh approach to his compositions but it also perceptually challenged the way the public saw the world around them. Previously artists would portray entire scenes without concern for accuracy in terms of viewpoint yet composed in such a way that the image remained convincing as an actual space.[16] Degas abandoned this unrealistic approach and favoured a naturalistic viewpoint, which has often been described as voyeuristic, as if he were peeping through a keyhole. However this is a simplistic reading of his new approach to composition. By cutting the image off at a particular range of vision, what is seen is not only similar to how the viewer sees the world but it allows the narrative of the work to continue beyond the borders of the work. What is happening outside the frame is as important as what is depicted. This is significant within the context of my work as it demonstrates a result which is exemplified by photographic framing and also draws reference to the creation of a narrative that exists outside the frame.

Conceptually, this compositional shift also led to a tighter, more constricted sense of space which often led to a portrayal of an interior which was dense and claustrophobic. This effect is evident in Degas' work *Bellelli Family*, 1859-60 *(Figure 17)* which portrays his aunt Laura, her husband Baron Gennaro Bellelli and their three daughters who are, "positioned frieze-like

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16 An example of this is Edouard Manet painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, the reflection in the mirror is an inaccurate depiction of what would actually appear, the artist has used it as a device to add detail.

in a shallow space that gives shape to their emotional confinement"[17] .

Figure 17: Bellelli Family, 1859-60, Edgar Degas

Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollack examine this portrait in their publication *Dealing with Degas* where they discuss how Degas has composed the picture in such a way that the décor itself becomes as important as the figures within it. Instead of the head of the family dominating the space in the patriarchal manner of other painters of the time, he is 'encased' within the frame of the fireplace and desk. His massive chair which is positioned so his back is facing the viewer and his slumped posture, adds to the sensation of entrapment within his family structure and suggests that their possessions are engulfing them rather than elevating their status as a middle class family. His family form a triangular configuration from which he is separated. The result is a family that appears fractured. The tension that is evident in this work further demonstrates Degas's interest in portraying more than an accurate rendition of the scene. He is suggesting a desire to look further into the painting, creating a narrative that exists behind what is presented, puncturing the ideals of family. A further indication of

17 Reed, C. (1996) *Not At Home: The Suppression of Domesticity In Modern Art and Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, London

the significance of this work as a comment on family is the suggestion of the past by including a picture of the grandfather on the wall and the future with the ambiguous figure and clothing of the mother, suggesting the possibility of her expecting another child, the next generation. The artist was interested in presenting more than an idealised family portrait. He was far more concerned with creating a psychological space which spoke of realities within peoples lives, of fragmentation, isolation and disjuncture rather than a fake harmony as depicted by more conventional artists of the time.

This atmosphere of confinement and hidden narratives created by compositional devices and symbolic objects within an image is of great importance in my own work, it alludes to the complexity of domestic relationships by offering possible interpretations of people's position and gaze coupled with the objects that surround them.

Figure 18: 'The Interior', 1868, Edgar Degas

The Interior (Figure 18), 1868, is another example of an 'underlying hostility between figures.'[18] This painting has an uncomfortable use of space similar to the painting of the Bellelli family yet rather than creating tension through the constriction of the tight parameters of the work, this

18 Kendall, Richard., Pollock, Griselda, (1949) *Dealing with Degas: representations of Women and the politics of vision*, Universe, 1992, New York, Pp. 46

work's tension is created through the separation and space between the figures. This work, also entitled *The Rape*, creates an uncomfortable sexual atmosphere, suggesting the occurrence of something untoward. The male appears predatory, dominating the space with a provocative stance and gaze. The female figure's posture appears vulnerable and insecure; her state of half undress further confirms the occurrence of an unwanted sexual act. The décor is feminine in nature suggesting that the male is the intruder in her space. This tension is further heightened by Degas' use of light. This light implies intimacy yet within this context its function is to veil indiscretions, heightening the idea of the sinister nature of what goes on behind closed doors in private interior worlds.

His interest in exposing the truth within private dwellings and the use of compositional devices and pictorial clues that lead the viewer to investigate what is usually hidden behind closed doors is an influence that I identify within my own work, and could be considered one of the main concerns of the following example of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.

Rear Window

Figure 19: Film Stills from Rear Window, Alfred Hitchcock (1954)

Photography and film as art forms have shared many creative devices both formally and conceptually. There is a distinction made between a

photograph and a film still, although they are both frozen moments in time. An association is made that a film still is a moment that precedes, and is followed by many more moments creating the illusion of movement in real-time, whereas a photograph may suggest what has happened before or after what we see, but can also exist in isolation.

In my own work I have been influenced by film formally with the use of light and positioning of figures and conceptually by the implication of a hidden narrative and sense of pause as in a film still.

A particular influence, which features in my work, is related to films of a specific era between the 1940s and 50s. During my formative years around puberty I chose to stay home fixed to the midday movie rather than participate in family outings (the teenager's curse). I would immerse myself in movies such as *High Society, Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Elvis movies and some of Hitchcock finest films such as *North by Northwest*, *To Catch a Thief* and *Rear Window*. These worlds seemed foreign yet familiar and an easy yet highly visual escape (these were re-runs viewed in the 1980s). I will focus on Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window* as it is not only one of the most memorable films but is thematically significant within the context of my work.

Based on a short story by Cornell Woolrich, *Rear Window* 1954, is described as "arguably the most exquisitely handcrafted feature…[It] has often been described as Hitchcock's testament because it sums up so many of his ideas about filmmaking: his fascination with voyeurism and love of technical restrictions…" [19]

The film's plot centres around a photo journalist, Jefferies, who is temporarily trapped in his apartment. He finds entertainment by looking out of his window into the worlds of his neighbours, aided by the viewfinder of his long-range camera. The viewers' interest is gained by the observations of the neighbouring apartments. Hitchcock creates several subplots surrounding the murder mystery which are far more subtle in their portrayal of people's private domestic lives.

19 Jonathan Rosenbaum, Chicago Reader, February 25, 2000. P.777 Alfred Hitchcock: *A Life of Darkness and Light*

Figure 20: Film Stills from Rear Window, Alfred Hitchcock (1954)

Although this work uses many filmic qualities within its editing and framing, the theatrical nature of its visual appearance can be attributed to the elaborate purpose built set. This involved an actual size apartment block including a partial street and lane way often described as Hitchcock's life sized doll's house. The lighting is also very theatrical, imitating the television like qualities of an illuminated room emphasised by the darkness that surrounds it. This theatrical presentation of interiors, similar

to sets from stage plays, influenced my own work. (This is elaborated on in chapter three in a discussion on my work being created as sets.)

Much of the film's dialogue surrounds the themes of voyeurism, guilt, relationships and sexuality. These are subjects which are closely associated with private, domestic environments. In one scene a detective friend of the main character warns him about his newly acquired habit of surveying his surroundings, " ...it's a secret, private world, you are looking into out there, and people do a lot of things in private they couldn't possibly explain in public." [20]

There is a suggestion that much of Jefferies' interest in other people's apartments and the lives contained in them is actually an avoidance of his own personal life. The author of *Hitchcock's Films Revisited,* Robin Wood, discusses the idea of looking at the apartment windows like an audience views a cinema screen, looking at other peoples' lives to think about their own. [21]

Wood describes one of Hitchcock's central concerns as being...

> The way people build these protective facades around themselves, and claim it as their identity, it's a way of protecting themselves against the unpredictability and chaos of life all the things we don't understand, not simply in the world but within ourselves ...the main character is viewed as being both trapped physically and emotionally within his apartment, comparing his dichotomy to the other apartments as being the same, that they are all trapped and these spaces, becoming likened to prison cells. [22]

This idea of the contradiction of interior space within the home being a representation of our identity whilst also protecting our identity is an important concept considered in my work. This and the interest in filmic qualities within their art is shared with the photographers who follow. Wall and Crewdson in particular have been influenced by Alfred Hitchcock.

20 Hitchcock, A. (1954) *Rear Window* (DVD), Universal

21 Hitchcock, A. (1954) *Rear Window* (DVD), Universal

22 Hitchcock, A. (1954) *Rear Window* (DVD), Universal

Section 2: Construction Photographers

Michael Kohler sumarizes the art of construction photography in the conclusion of his preface to *Constructed Realites: the Art of Staged Photography.*

> The aim is to juggle as adeptly as possible as many meanings and levels of meaning as possible and to keep everything in suspension – in tableaux like halls of mirrors in which objects are duplicated endlessly and gradually disappear; or like an echo-chamber in which motifs and melodies overlay one another to the point of unrecognisability. The aim in short is the simulation of narration, the appearance of sense…but in an art form that plays with the realization that there can no longer be established truths instead only contradictory mixtures of appearance and reality, fact and fiction.[23]

In the 1980s many contemporary photographers shifted away from documenting people and places as they appear naturally, choosing to abandon the idea of photography as a true depiction of the world in a frozen moment, in favour of embracing the artifice that already exist within the genre. This created a movement of construction or fabrication photography. Artists began staging their images using a variety of artistic devices that likened them to practitioners of film and theatre, "…they became directors, set and costume designers and even actors within their own scenes."[24]

It can be argued that all photography is staged to some degree even if it is merely the selection of topic and framing. The difference with the images created by a construction photographer is the deliberate use of artificially created environments. Rather than convince the viewer that they have captured an authentic moment from reality, this form of photography often exposes its fakery intentionally to evoke enquiry into its aims and purposes as art. "Practitioners of staged and constructed photography

23 Zdenek, F., Kohler, M., Vowijnckel, A., (1985/1995) *Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography*, Edition Stemmle P.39

24 Zdenek, F., Kohler, M., Vowijnckel, A., (1985/1995) *Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography*, Edition Stemmle P.7

invent their motifs, freely combining the real and the invented, photography and painting, photography and stage design, weaving historical and mythological references into their works, and do not hesitate for a moment to manipulate reality… the question is not what reality is, but what modes of representing it are available."[25]

This has also impacted on formal qualities of photography such as the use of colour and the increase in scale to a much larger presentation of work. Examples of artists working within this field of photography are vast. In this paper I have chosen to focus on photographers whose work is theatrically based, using sets and actors in forms of 'narrative tableaux' and whose photographic investigations involve the domestic realm.

Jeff Wall

Jeff Wall's work dates back to the early 1970s. He is considered one of the most influential photographers within this genre. He is heavily influenced by paintings from history yet reflects an attitude of the everyday in his work.

Wall's work presents images that on first viewing could be considered mundane in their subject matter. However, it is this use of the familiar that evokes the viewer's interest, for once we investigate further it is clear that what we are looking at is far from ordinary. The large scale of the work and presentation of the images in light-boxes provides an illuminated depth which entices us in the same way as advertising, and exaggerates its impact.

An early work of Wall's titled *The Destroyed Room* exemplifies both the historical context as he references the painting by Eugene Delacroix, *'Death of Sardanapalus'* and the influence of the commercial window display. This work has an immediate sensation of the aftermath of an aggressive act, yet there is a fragility demonstrated by the figurine remaining pristine and untouched. The scattered objects are distinctly feminine, which suggests

25 Zdenek, F., Kohler, M., Vowijnckel, A., (1985/1995) *Constructed Realities: The Art of Staged Photography*, Edition Stemmle Pp.8

Figure 21: The Destroyed Room, (1978) Jeff Wall, Light box transparency,

to the viewer this violence stems from the masculine perspective. It is the immense detail in this work that creates such a strong impact and makes the scale, 150 x 234cm and illumination so relevant. This is noted by the art historian Ralph Ubl, in his discussion on the meaning within the detail and the impact of the presentation.

> ...a placement of a cluster of gleaming tacks in the wall near the "window" at the right of the picture, are indiscernible in reproduction, but like the small pieces of jewelry on the carpeted floor, attract ones gaze when one stands before the actual transparency.[26]

The work was displayed in life-size fashion within a shop front, which further plays on the deception and construction of the piece as it competes with real life window displays.

Figure 22: Installation shot of The Destroyed Room, (1978) Light box transparency, Jeff Wall

26 P.62 Michael Fried. *Why photography matters as never before/ Jan Estep*, "Pictures making meaning: interview with Jeff Wall," Bridge Magazine, 2003, http:/www.bridgemagazine.org/online/feature archive/000027.php

Wall's interest in the commonplace or 'everyday' as referred to earlier in this section, is evident throughout his work. He relates this back to an historical influence referring to Baudelaire and the idea of painting modern life. He divides his work into two categories, 'cinematographic' and 'documentary' depending on the level of personal intervention in the work.

The work I am focusing on falls into the category of cinematographic as I am primarily interested in work which is constructed. He describes this work as "neo-realism" as stated in an interview with Jan Estep: "I use the term 'neo-realism' in the sense that the Italian filmmakers of the 1940s and after used it. It refers to using non-professional performers in roles very close to their own lives, photographing events as if you were doing reportage, and recognising good subjects in the everyday."[27]

Figure 23: A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947' (1990), C-Type Print

In his later work such as *'A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947'* (1990) Wall has increased the theatricality of the scene he portrays with a sense of hyper-realism. As the title states, this is a child's birthday party of the late 1940s. Despite its sense of authencity, it has been shot in Wall's Vancouver set, there is a strong sense of its fabrication, and staging. The significance of the time period relates to the changing

27 P.63 Michael Fried. *Why photography matters as never before/ Jan Estep*, "Pictures making meaning: interview with Jeff Wall," Bridge Magazine, 2003, http:/www.bridgemagazine.org/online/feature/archive/000027.php) Fix
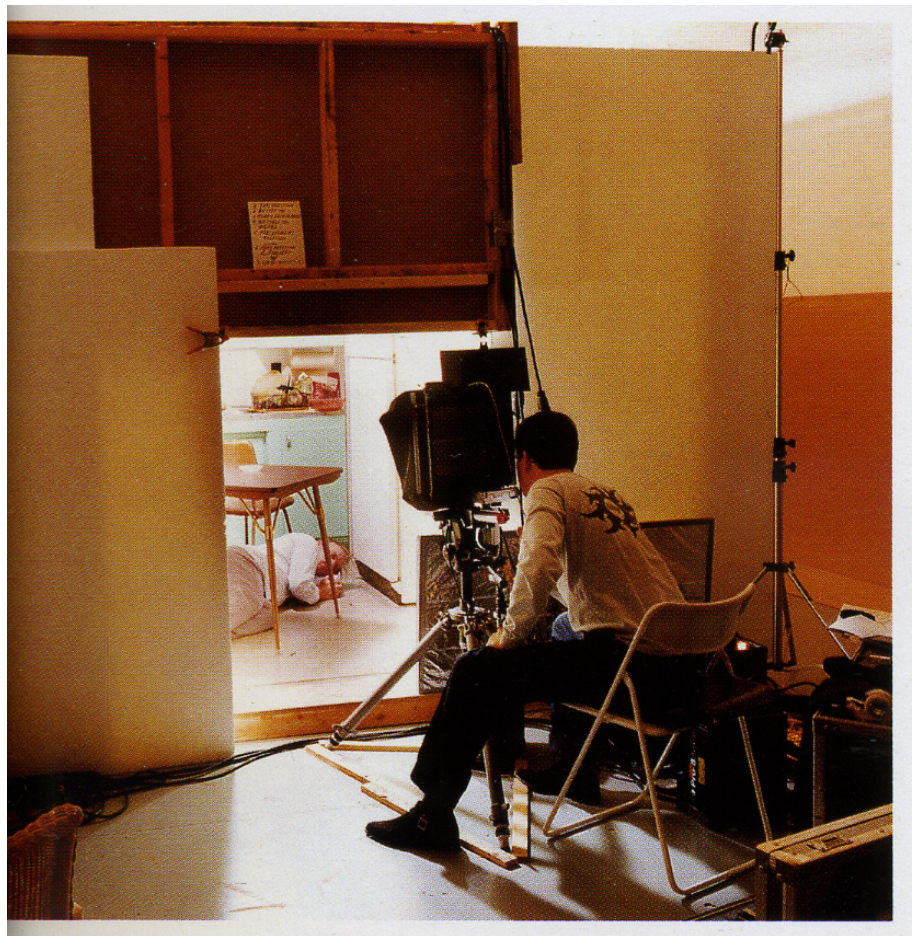
Figure 24: Example of a set created by Jeff Wall for Top Image: Insomnia, 1994

culture of America at that time, where television was superseding the live entertainment which existed previously. Once again, Wall's attention to detail and ornamentation, along with the focused gaze of the child onlookers and low ceiling, emphasized by the floating balloons, creates a tension with sinister overtones which are both strained and suffocating. He contrasts the innocence of the children with the disturbing appearance of the mannequin, ventriloquist's dummies often being associated with evil and coming to life without good intentions.

Wall discusses his work in relationship to his use of the domestic environment by saying:

> The everyday, or the commonplace, is the most basic and richest artistic category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new. But at the same time, there is an openness that permits people to recognize what is there in the picture, because they have already seen something like it somewhere. So the everyday is a space in which meaning accumulates, but it's pictorial realization is what carries the meanings into the realm of the pleasurable. [28]

Jeff Wall's work is extremely significant within the context of my own work firstly because of his use of light boxes as a presentation device and association with tropes within advertising. The illuminating qualites of a light box, accentuates detail, highlighting the interiors and their occupants to offer a fresh and mesmorising look at situations that usually remain hidden behind the walls of our domestic environments and secondly because of the entirely constructed nature of his sets. Another photographer who uses a constructed set and is interested in the intrigue found within the everyday is Gregory Crewdson.

28 Fried, Michael. (2008) *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London. Pp.64

Gregory Crewdson

In Gregory Crewdson's *Twilight Series*,1998- 2002, we are presented with elaborately staged, large-scale tableaux that have been described as:

> ...exploring the domestic landscape and its relationship to an artificially heightened natural world. The collision between the normal and the paranormal in these narrative images produce a tension that serves to transform the topology of the suburban landscape into a place of wonder and anxiety.[29]

Figure 25 Twighlight Series: Untitled (Ophelia) 2001 Gregory Crewdson, C-Type Print

In many interviews Crewdson has made reference to the fact that his father was a psychiatrist who conducted his therapy sessions within the home. As his father had a particular interest in Freudian analysis, much discussion was centred on dreams and, as with most over-heard conversations, were fragmented. This experience had a direct impact on his work. The dreamlike qualities, coupled with both sinister and sexual overtones are immediately evident.

29 Crewdson, Gregory., Moody, R. (2002) *Twilight / photographs by Gregory Crewdson*, Harry N. Abrams, New York

"A childhood of hearing dreams of his neighbours had made the actual magical, made the space of the urban and suburban into an unearthly and terrifying arena of possibility."[30]

Crewdson's techniques of photographing his highly constructed scenes, are extremely elaborate, involving the same sophisticated set-ups and methods used by filmmakers. He spends months finding locations and has a crew of assistants involved in the final production of his shots which include production managers, directors of photography, aerial engineers, camera operators, lighting supervisors, casting consultants and carpenters. This intricate production methodology creates images that are extremely filmic, sharing the idea of a film-still, having a story line or action that occurs before and after what we are observing, yet unlike an actual film-still they are highly detailed and are more fixed within that moment which exists between the real and the staged. This allows the slightly stilted artificial arrangements of people and sets to evoke questions and wonderment, while encouraging the viewer to look longer for answers.

Figure 26: Production shot from Twighlight Series

Crewdson's presentation of suburbia exists in the detail, creating beautiful and mysterious images that are always underpinned by sinister and eerie sub-plots of misadventure or hidden sub-contexts. The truth of these tableaux (as photographs) with reference to any kind of reality is

30 Crewdson, Gregory., Moody, R. (2002) *Twilight / photographs by Gregory Crewdson*, Harry N. Abrams, New York

unnecessary as we, the viewer, get lost in their dreamlike existence which in many instances could be considered more like a nightmare.

Factors such as constructing a suggested narrative and exploring worlds which exists between reality and fantasy are characteritics which have influenced my own work. My interiors are far less fanciful. I am looking to create questions of authencity rather than evoke a trancending experience. In contrast Angela Strassheim's work is placed within reality, manipulated by her selection and arrangements of actual domestic environments and their inhabitants to project a suggestion of narrative.

Figure 27: Twighlight Series, Untitled (2001 -2002) Gregory Crewdson, C-Type Print

Figure 28: Twighlight Series: Untitled (1999) Gregory Crewdson, C-Type Print

Angela Strassheim

Figure 29: Left Behind Series: Untitled (Grandmother's Bed) (2005) Angela Stassheim, C-Type Print

In her series *Left Behind*, 2005, American photographer, Angela Strassheim juxtaposes portraits of her born-again Christian family with 'domestic narratives'. Her images are exact. The influence of her background in forensic photography is demonstrated in her use of clean even lighting and overall crisp focus, allowing us to be lost in evidential detail.

Strassheim invites us to diagnose constructed scenarios, which are both real in that they often involve her actual family members in their own homes, yet are exaggerated through the information she chooses to highlight in contrast to what we cannot see. Strassheim also manipulates our gaze by positioning many of her subjects directly in front of us. Although the subjects are staring into the lens, Strassheim leads us as the viewer to read the subject(s) of the photographs as looking into a mirror; this is both engaging and disturbing. Strassheim's works speak of her childhood memories and her constricted religious background. Though this is her personal experience, we (as the viewer) go beyond what is presented in the frame, and engage our voyeuristic inclinations to invent a narrative that explains what we see. This could suggest that the answers that we are

searching for can be found in what we don't see through an absence of information. Strassheim's presentations of perfect utopias within suburbia reinforce a sense of disquiet, as if we are trained to be suspicious of visual perfection.

> Family bonds, as anyone with a family knows can be a complicated entanglement. Parents have hopes and expectations; children chafe against them. A warm, loving embrace becomes a suffocating stranglehold. In Angela Strassheim's vivid color photographs of well-groomed, comfortable families, those bonds are by turns received and resisted in a variety of small moments. And the longer we look at her seemingly mundane scenes, the more unsettling they appear.[31]

Figure 30: Left Behind Series: Untitled (Father and Son) (2005) Angela Stassheim, C-Type Prints

Strassheims use of colour is very distinct. Each image is highly saturated and this is exaggerated by the characteristics of her lighting which is clear and crisp. This allows the viewer to pour over the detail in a manner similar to

31 http://www.marvelligallery.com/LBCatalogueEssay.html

the work of Wall. The colour also alludes to the domestic spaces that she is photographing, in that they are slightly trapped within a time period which is nostalgic yet somehow menacing. I am particularly interested in how Angela Strassheim engages the viewer by visual suggestions of what may be going on beyond her images. She is offering manipulated interpretations on worlds she herself has belonged to, allowing the slippage between what is real and constructed to tell a story. The use of real environments that are manipulated through what is focused on or what is added or removed can also be seen in the work of Anne Zahalka.

Figure 31: Left Behind Series: Untitled (Miss Emily Jones (2005) Angela Stassheim, C-Type Prints

Figure 32: Open House Series (1995) Anne Zahalka, Light Box Transparencies

Anne Zahalka

The series *'Open House'* by Anne Zahalka (1995) are works created using an ambiguity between fiction photography and documentary photography. Like Strassheim's work, Zahalka depicts real households and their occupants yet she manipulates what we see with careful orchestration of the people and their objects. This structured arrangement, combined with the use of people in their own environment, allows the work to hover between the natural and artificial.

Zahalka demonstrates in this work her interest in the domestic environment and what it reveals about the people to which the environment belongs. By combining particular objects around the subjects we, as the viewer, are led to formulate an identity associated with these arrangements. Sarrah Preuhs writes:

> The complexities of their surroundings weave patterns of human interests, beliefs, habits and fashions: personal histories and collective reality. Anne Zahalka's images from Open House display the nuanced tensions and intimate relationships of the sitters in mundane situations. The voyeuristic lens of the photographer exoticises the ordinary, revealing the infinite variability amongst all that is house and home.[32]

32 http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/1995/01/01/78/

The subjects within the photographs have expressions of disconnection, and with no particular emotion being expressed, the viewer is left with only what surrounds the subjects to assess their character. The impression is given that Zahalka intends not to reveal any intimate interpretation of these people, only that we see them within a perceived private environment, a domestic space. In the catalogue, *Hall of Mirrors: Anne Zahalka Portraits 1987-2007*, she discusses the camera as a tool for distorting the truth, when questioned about what we can learn from a person within a photographic portrait.

> The making and taking of portraits is such a contrivance. There is nothing natural about the process… I give very little direction to my sitters – I prefer to let them find their own way of sitting. Increasingly I am more interested in the unease expressed by a pose…a photographic portrait is also only one moment in the course of sitting and many expressions pass across the face during this time. So while we might want to read into the person before us in the photograph through their face and eyes, there is no real way of knowing. Everything else in the picture however is a clue.[33]

The characteristic of 'staging' within photography and Zahalka's interest in the real versus constructed is evident throughout her work. It is a demonstration of her interest in domestic Australian culture, and the formation of an identity with the representation of nationality.

This interest in the connections between our living environments and their influence on our identity is significant in relation to my own investigations. Australia being a relatively young country has a sense of fast tracking in terms of taste and style. It is not beholden to a long history and this is reflected in its culture. What we consider nostalgic or even historic is usually not more than fifty to a hundred years old. The decor in *Open House* is 'retro' yet the people are dressed in contemporary clothing of the time in which the work was made, indicating that this is a statement of their taste in decor. They are possibly hiding their true identity by placing their homes in the past.

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33 Zahalka, A, (2007), *Hall of Mirrors: Anne Zahalka, portraits 1987-2007*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Victoria, Australia.

Zahalka's titling of the series as *Open House* suggests that these spaces and their occupants are no longer private dwellings but are being revealed to the public to be judged and analysed, however this exposure of privacy has been controlled and constructed by the artist to only reveal a manipulated existance.

Similarly to Zahalka's work, the models in my images are dressed in contemporary clothing yet their environments have a sense of being trapped in an era not unlike Strassheim's Left Behind series. However the occupants in my images have in no way chosen this decor. It is a fabricated home which they are placed in, indicating a confusion in identity both culturally and individually.

In conclusion, the artists and artistic genre I have explored within this chapter are united by their interest in exposing the hidden truths that lie behind the four walls of private domestic environments. They do this through the construction of domestic interiors whose artificial nature is highlighted by contrasting the familiar with the foreign. In each case these tableaux suggest a narrative which continues beyond the frame.

Figure 33: Open House Series (1995) Anne Zahalka, Light Box Transparencies

Chapter 3: The progression of the work

Project description

Creating the physical work for this research project involved processes and techniques that were conceived in earlier undergraduate work as discussed in the introduction to this paper. The project began with the construction of a purpose built set, located in the car park of my home. This set was then decorated/dressed as varying living room settings each with specific décor relevant to an undisclosed narrative. The décor is assembled from continual foraging and collecting of interior objects and ephemera from tips, op shops, second hand shops, garage sales and loans from friends. The decorated set is photographed in afternoon light. It is then further photographed with a subject(s) who have been specifically selected to either contrast or compliment the environment and contribute to the narrative element.

Although the work references the theatre in terms of 'sets' and 'actors' there is no script or dialogue to determine 'plot'. The intention is to encourage the viewer to visually interrogate the individual works and establish their own narrative by relating the constructed scenarios to their own lives and experience. The clues or prompts are in the objects and individuals within the rooms. A person's gaze and body positioning can completely alter the perception of an object and its meaning within the scene. For example, a child's toy in a room where there are no children and two disconnected adults has the potential to lead the viewer to a different reading than if there was a child in the room. If you placed the same individual in each constructed room, the individuals' 'story' would change with the decor, as the rooms themselves are already loaded with narrative.

Methodology

After preliminary experimentation with elements such as composition, camera angles, lighting and the positioning of people and their gaze, I determined a process of working that I felt would not only create a consistent and engaging body of work but would also inform my research into the construction of the domestic space in terms of its theatricality and identity.

My aim with the work was to create images that existed within a liminal space between what was perceived to be real and what was fictional. The compositional framing of the work didn't reveal any of the artifice such as blue skies instead of ceilings or cars parked next to a lounge chair. I felt that revealing the illusion, although perhaps visually interesting, limited the interpretation of the work and diluted the narratives. Leaving a weed to grow between the wall and the carpet could have been idiosyncratic and visually interesting yet if it appeared in every room, it could have been in danger of becoming a tired 'one liner'. Evidence of artifice without an immediate reveal is exemplified in the use of natural lighting that could only be achieved due to the lack of walls and ceilings. Another example is revealed upon viewing the series in its entirety. The repetition created by the limitations of a two walled set becomes more obvious when viewing the works together. The choice of what is revealed and what is concealed allows the viewer to slip between the stories being evoked and the questionable authenticity of the environment upon which the story is staged.

The series explores collections, not only of objects and decor but of people and the end result is a collection of domestic environments. The rooms were assembled to represent living rooms, a 'public' area within the home. This is the space where people display things for general viewing. Whether this is for the occupants of the home or visitors, the purpose is to communicate characteristics of their personalities and life experiences.

I repeated the use of particular objects such as clocks, phones, mirrors and lamps as it is these everyday items that cement the spaces as domestic living environments and allowed me to establish a formal framework in which to create. The familiarity of these objects could awaken memories of rooms once lived in. The addition of an unusual object such as an artifical bird terrarium, could similarly evoke memory because of its uniqueness and also provide a point of narrative.

I have categorised the devices used in my methodology into the following headings: the set, lighting, colour, nostalgia, ornamentation and models.

The set

Having established an interest for the creation of illusionary interiors from the home environment, the progression from a small-scale set constructed in my home to a larger outdoor setting was a logical development. This resolution solved the practical concerns of the space required for such a project and the logistical issues related to the storage and facilities needed to re-create entire living room scenarios. The outdoor environment also became a significant conceptual consideration due to the public nature of the set which was built in a large car park area outside my house and the interesting effects the natural lighting conditions created within the work.

Figure 34: Out shot of set

The presentation of a private space within a public domain encouraged additional investigations regarding the nature of the domestic environment and the associated expectations of this nominally private space. This location was available for public scrutiny during construction and documentation of the work and the changing appearance of each room became a spectacle for regular passers-by. This was met with both humour and apprehension, as everyday people encountered scenarios that were familiar to them with their nostalgic characteristics, yet were also often confused and uncomfortable because of memory associations and the

curious juxtaposition of the setting. In many ways this reaction can be associated with ideas of the 'uncanny' in terms of the presentation of something familiar, an interior from a house, in an unfamiliar environment, a carpark. People's everyday experiences of reality are confronted by the presentation of something they recognise being placed in a dysfunctional location, that is not private and exposed to outside elements. This sense of the spectacle increased, as neighbours, tourists and interested passers-by became intrigued and engaged.

The positioning of a constructed set within the public domain brought the inside out. The stage-like qualities of the invented rooms appearing within a suburban landscape positioned the observers in the role of an audience member. By interpreting what was being seen as a performance, the sense of being invited to watch a show occurred, as I assembled the rooms and then photographed them. When I re-shot the room with live models, the public became less forward in approaching the scene as if intruding on something private. The general reaction of the public was that of enquiry into why I was placing something that was usually inside outside but this was quickly disregarded and the suspension of disbelief usually turned into a recollection of memory as they relayed stories of grandmothers and aunts and rooms where they had spent time in the past. Most of the stories began with, "I remember my mother having a lamp like that or a mirror, clock, statue, wallpaper etc…" The weight of association attributed to the constructed environments outweighed its artifice allowing spectators to suspend disbelief in order to explore their memories.

The physical creation of each room involved a considerable amount of attention to detail. Wallpaper was used as a transformative device as it was definite in its variations. One room could immediately be differentiated from another while at the same time unifying the series because of the elaborate nature of the patterning which optically connected the work. I experimented with several approaches including single colour wall paper, dividing walls between two types of paper and including divisional devices such as constructed wall divides. On several occasions a particular wallpaper once applied was rejected as it did not fulfill my expectations of a convincing interior or was too dominating when compared to what made up the rest of the space. An example of this was an entirely red wall paper

Figure 35: Set construction and location

that had no patterning. Not only did it cast a red glow over the rest of the environment but it flattened the space so much that it produced no illusion of a real room.

My aim in the construction of the sets was to seduce the viewer into a series of invented worlds, allowing them to suspend disbelief but only upon first approach. By allowing evidence of artifice I hoped to encourage further inspection into the space's authenticity. This meant that I had to make constant decisions on what would aid the deception whilst at the

Figure 36 Out shot of set and resulting final photograph

same time revealing it. For example as mentioned in the introduction to this section, a weed growing between the carpet and the wall, would be too obvious in collapsing the illusion whereas rippling carpet and flimsy vinyl flooring imitating wood or curtains on a rod covering a nonexistent window, remained subtle clues to the fakery.

In addition to these devices used to evoke questions for the viewer, other strategies were deployed once I had assessed the space through the lens, such as the positioning of framed pictures at specific heights to shorten or raise the space within the camera frame, especially in relation to the positioning of the models. This was nessessary to include details within the room without exposing their construction. Although there were extensive planning processes as to the room's effectiveness within the parameters of believability, the final result could only be fine tuned in-situ.

Each room and its contents and models were pre-arranged in various plans as they required assessment of their success as an arrangement. A convincing yet questionable environment was determined by what was added and subtracted and in what configuration.

I found that one of the most significant devices aiding the creation of a liminal space existing between reality and artifice was the use of light.

Lighting

The use of natural daylight, without the diffusion of outside structures such as roofs or four walls, has become an important signifier of the artifice of the constructed rooms. Heightening the idea of the structures being similar to life-size dolls houses, the sunlight impacts on both the characteristic of the rooms and their occupants. Like a desk lamp being shone into a miniature dolls house, it casts extreme shadows that no artificial lamps or natural window light could normally create.

This use of light disorientates the viewer. Its source is unclear and reinforces the idea of a constructed or unreal environment. As discussed in Chapter One, the domestic space can draw metaphorical links within

the theatrical spaces of stage and film. We can then consider my set as a performance space that is impersonating a real environment, a stage set as a domestic space, sharing similar formal characteristics, such as curtains and lighting. The curtains open and the lights come up to reveal the scene to the audience. In the domestic environment we use these devices to conceal rather than expose the scene to the public gaze and lighting changes throughout this environment depending on the use of the space. Where comfort rather than functionality is pursued, in a sitting room/living room environment, a subdued light is preferred, while bright lights are considered more functional for bathrooms and kitchens.

The lighting in my constructed rooms all come from the same source, the sun. The direct nature of this light means that its appearance is not what we are familiar with in the context of light in our own homes. The light also varies from one room to the next due to factors such as cloud coverage. Although the works were all shot at the same time of day, uncontrolled factors such as seasonal changes affected how the light fell. This variation was a consideration before the commencement of the work and influenced the decision to shoot outdoors. The artificial impact of this use of light on the final images further encourages the viewer to question what is real within the work and although some of the images reveal the source of light more immediately than others the overall staged sensation of the work becomes apparent.

Figure 37: Example of the impact of natural lighting on a set

Colour

The individual rooms created within this series are dominated by specific colour palettes. I intentionally used colour as a vehicle for association and memory. As with our other senses - a pungent smell of rotting fruit fallen from a tree or a romantic song danced to with a loved one - our sense of sight can spark memories of a bygone era or environment from the past. As fashions change, our memory holds colours specific to a time or experience, such as a mission brown couch from your childhood house or pastel green curtains from grandma's kitchen.

Figure 38: 1950s magazine advertisment for the use of colour within the home

Décor colours evolve through stylists reading trends and relaying these to manufacturers and then finally to consumer outlets. This evolution can represent a season or era. We then choose from what is available to decorate our homes. This market chain is not made obvious to consumers as much of the merchandising success relies on the buyer feeling a sense of individual choice and creative freedom in the selection of their home décor. It is only in retrospect that these 'trends' can be apprehended as something that has been manipulated and preselected for us.

In my series of photographs the use of colour has been deliberately exaggerated both by décor selection and the use of light boxes. This is punctuated when the works are viewed together. The vibrancy and dominance of individual colours function to accentuate the constructed nature of the rooms, likening them to décor magazine layouts as opposed to spaces that are actually lived in, where styles and colours become part of the assemblage of life experiences.

Figure 39: Examples of the use of colour within my constructed rooms

Nostalgia and ornamentation

Each room is constructed to include assemblages from collections of second-hand materials sourced from a variety of opportunity shops and recycling centres. Objects such as clocks and telephones, wall coverings such as wood veneers and wallpaper and ornaments popular to a particular era, each contain the memory of another time and space - their own histories. These histories remain unknown but are given a second life and new interpretation within my images. An unwanted wedding present that may have been pushed to the back of a cupboard can be positioned in pride of place on a table within the photograph, reinventing its significance and shifting its meaning away from its original context. As taste and style change, so does the value and relevance of the objects created for the time. What was once considered tasteful, can become gaudy and may again become tasteful with time. Unlike kitsch, nostalgia is generally looked upon more favorably as a marker of fond memories of a time gone by. Whether something is viewed as kitsch or nostalgic depends on an individual's interpretation and choosing objects in my work that are distinct or unusual in appearance, heightens the chance of them being memorable and open to association by the viewer.

The gathering of objects and décor items, wall and floor coverings and

Figure 40: An example of a collection of ornaments used in the constructed rooms

Figure 41: Examples of a collection of ornaments used in the constructed rooms

furniture, create collections that are used like a painter's palette or a props department in a theatre. The act of putting items together to create a particular aesthetic and theme, induces associations with memories and experiences and evokes narratives. For example, when finding a terrarium with an intricate floral arrangement involving fake flowers and blue birds (see figure 42), my first reaction is one of amazement that someone made this and loved it, it meant something to them. This thought process leads to imagining the person and what the story of their life might be. The next step is using that imaginative process to create a 'home' for this object. I

consider its formal qualities such as colour and shape, where it would be best viewed within the photograph whether on a table or shelf, then I begin to build a room around it. I revisit the idea of who may have owned it and look at the two blue birds. Maybe it represented a couple, much in love that wanted a physical symbol of their love, possibly it was made for a wedding anniversary. I decide to choose a couple as the occupants of the room as with the two love birds. I then choose two people that I feel have physical simarlarities and have the appearance of an enduring love. This method is completely subjective and is used as a process. It is not revealed except in the resulting photograph, which is left open for interpretation.

Figure 42: Bird Terarium collected for a room

The viewer's own self-referential insights is fundamental to my work. Their own life and memories are intrinsic to their interpretation. Visual prompts that evoke sensations of memory or association can be unique or commonplace depending on the individual.

As previously discussed in relationship to modernist ideals, ornaments rarely serve any practical purpose in terms of their form, that is to say a vase can be a simple vessel used to hold flowers; there is no functional advantage to being shaped like a fish. Generally an ornament is aquired and displayed within the home as a representation that brings the owner a visual sensation of joy, whether that is because it is a reminder of an event or person or because it is aesthetically pleasing to the owner. The collection of these objects once discarded means that their original associations are lost, allowing them to exist renewed within the context of an artwork. An object would influence the design of a room and create the story being told. In my series of works the objects within the rooms are as important as the people.

The Occupants

In this series, unlike in a traditional portrait, the environment in which the models are positioned is the dominant subject. It is designed and created in advance. The models' selection, although highly considered, is secondary to the composition of the set. Continuing on from the earlier analogy of the doll's house, the secondary subject of the photographs are the 'dolls' sourced from varying origins and assembled together to 'play house'. A comparison can also be made with theatre and film actors within a theatre or movie set, although the choice of 'real' people as opposed to professional actors was intended to reinforce the ambiguous truth within the work.

The occupants within the rooms have a sense of melancholy and introspection as if mentally removed from the environment in which they are placed. This is partly due to the fact that the models have no personal connection to their environment; therefore their relationship with the space becomes internal rather than external. It can also suggest entrapment, an emotion emphasised by the use of objects and décor that relate to other eras - the idea of being trapped in time. I intentionally structured the photo shoots so that the participants within the photographs didn't see the set until it was completely constructed. I wanted to create a transformative experience for the models themselves, allowing them to step into an illusionary space rather than to engage with the process of construction. This was a device to exaggerate the occupant's paradoxical relationship with the space in which they were placed. The stage-like quality of the set combined with the public nature of its location, evoked a situation where the models became actors and this added to the expressions they adopted in the final works.

The aim of my selection process was to bring together 'families' that I feel represent some examples of today's unconventional assortment of households, ranging from single individuals to larger extended families. The method of selection and placement of the subjects create an ambiguous scene, the intention being to raise questions of authenticity and emphasise the constructed nature of the image.

The models are positioned, both bodily and facially, to relay a sense of disconnection and discomfort. Little direction was given in terms of particular emotions that I was trying to convey only that they were not to smile. This is a device used in contemporary portrait photography to avoid the mask-like qualities associated with a smile. We say, "smile" when we take photos of our loved ones to create a happy record for prosperity. This may not be how the sitter is feeling, but how they wish to be presented. To remove this mask, the face becomes more open to the viewer's interpretations and suggests an internal dialogue. In my work, the occupants are aware of the camera's gaze yet they are not posing as in a family snapshot or formal portrait. My intent is to use these artistic devices to encourage the viewer to explore possible narratives.

In the creation of this work, I used my own internal narratives to drive the arrangements of both occupants and décor, evolving during the creation of each room. Each room has a sophisticated, albeit transient story constructed from an internal dialogue. This mix of the 'staged' combined with my memories, imagination and my own associations creates a result that is engaging yet confounding. Our need, as viewers, is to make sense of what we see, even when the truth of the portrayal is under question.

It is important that the general viewer is not privileged to my own internal dialogue and stories as I feel it would supersede their own experience of investigation and association. For example, instead of an ornament that reminds them of a family picnic in the countryside with Aunty June, it becomes my memory of a visit to Germany as a child.

This also relates to the assemblage of people - where I may be referencing an older man with his younger wife and child, the viewer may see a father talking to his daughter and grandson.

Individual evaluation of works; formally and conceptually
The following descriptions are my own subjective interpretations of each room, including my imagined scenarios/stories and formal devices used in the creation of the works. The subtitles below are my personal labels for each room.

1. Renter

Figure 43: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

This room belongs to a working class family who are expecting their first child. The woman is distant with a smile that could be a grimace, possibly because she is facing a life of domestic chores including motherhood, with little support or means. Her attire presents her as raw and vulnerable, emphasizing her pregnant figure, yet stripping her identity. The partner is escaping his reality with an adolescent's toy such as a remote control car or a video game. He is diminutized in comparison to her because his role within the family structure is weak, in comparison to her; she dominates the space to the extent that her body is cropped within the space. The largeness of this figure can flip the story to one of a suppressed man in his work clothes, hiding within adolescence, overpowered by his pregnant wife/girlfriend who is possibly disappointed in him. Included in the set is a funeral flower that belongs to a gravesite. Here it is being used as an ornament. It could represent the past, an absent mother/grandmother or support network. It is also a plastic flower imitating nature suspended in time. The pictures on the walls also represent nature. They symbolize a better world, an escape, but have the appearance of cheap décor art or hobby art.

2. Waiting room

Figure 44: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

In this work the décor is light and movable and conveys a sense of impermanence. This relates to the occupant's lack of a sense of belonging within the room. He is living there but he is a visitor. He is reluctantly in the space and possibly not wanted to be there. There is a sense that he is not just physically alone but also lonely. It could be an ex-wife's house, her taste and decor representing the difference between them. Or he could be unemployed and living with an aunt who hasn't changed her décor since the 60s-80s. His gaze could be on the wax candle cat, which represents a bad memory or disagreement.

The use of nature thematically within the décor also exists in this room. It appears stilted and frozen, juxtaposed to his attire which has an 'adventurer/hiker' style, creating an irony of his perhaps undiscovered potential. The repetition of formal elements such as the circular shadow of the lamp echoing the mirror and painting of the moonlit river encourages the eye to move around the scene.

3. Pop or Yellow room

Figure 45: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

This room contains a contemporary couple. There is a suggestion of absent children, represented by the toy and xylophone on the floor. The woman is dressed nostalgically but the tattoo places her in the present day. Her pose is cinematic, like a character from a film still, making her presence passive and slightly absent. He is partially clothed with ripped jeans and scuffed shoes; his position is in the classic pose of the 'thinker' yet there is a sense of hopelessness. Formally his positioning gives the appearance that he is being pushed out of the scene. The theatrical curtains and the ornaments on the table ground the woman in position taking up one third of the image and creating an "L" shape that leads the eye from the woman to the man. They are separated by the green 'outdoor lounge' which represents their emotional separation, punctuated by the crocheted cushion. The salt and pepper shakers on a shelf on the wall, repeat the idea of pairing but they are strangely positioned on the wall, which adds to the narrative. The details such as the old phone suggest she has an escape, a friend that is a phone call away. The bright yellows within the décor offer an awkward (fake) jolliness that mocks the melancholy of the occupants.

4. Modern with a small m

Figure 46: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

The irony with this room is the décor that was considered modern but is now dated. The centralized mirror reflects suburbia and contrasts with the print on the wall of an exotic location with romanticised buildings. The occupants are positioned in a circle also. This takes the eye around from person to baby, baby to person, creating a grouping, yet their gazes separate and are disconnected from each other. The obvious reading of this image is a couple with twins living with one of their fathers. The attire of the group is what creates the additional narrative. Why is the older man and the woman dressed in robes and pyjamas, whilst the younger father character is dressed? Could this suggest he is visiting or be a clue to the relationship between the older man and woman, are they together? This image is an example of the piecing together of a family and the slippage between reality and artifice. The two adults in the background are together in 'real life' and the baby in the woman's arms is theirs. The man in the foreground is my husband and the baby in white is ours. The babies were born one day apart.

5. The Lodge

Figure 47: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

The lodge, is the most masculine room. The décor has a sense of an Alpine cabin, yet there is an austere atmosphere created by the dark green wallpaper, the regency rug and club-like chairs. The assortment of occupants are ambiguous, are they related by marriage or birth? The woman and child are robed whereas the man is dressed as if about to leave or has just arrived. Nature once again features in the pictures and ornaments, the deer theme repeats throughout. The woman is positioned centrally and the relationship between her colouring and the child links them as possibly related. Formally a contrast can be seen between the freedom of the horses and the containment of the female figure. Her gaze is to the viewer but her eyes are distant, suggesting an internal narrative. There is also a sense of past, (man) present (woman) and future (boy) in their positioning and gaze.

6. Scandinavia

Figure 48 Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

This room contains a woman alone with two teenage daughters and a dog. The two daughters have contrasting body language. The girl on the right is more contained and closed, protecting herself from the world. The girl on the left is relaxed even asleep but seems slightly awkward. The mother appears to be caught in thought and also has an ambiguous resigned smile. The ornaments and pictures are clues to the woman's past in terms of travels and interests or visual escapism to foreign lands. Formally the golden rays of the sunset picture appear to shine on the gold couch and the choice of colours resemble a Germanic or Scandinavian décor (or at least a suburban Australian version) possibly suggesting heritage lost, emphasized by the girls' light hair. The bottle of schnapps on the bookshelf and the green carpet were the instigating items for the creation of this room.

7. Travellers

Figure 49: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

The conception of this space began with the selection of wallpaper. The Japanese woodblock style print (I felt) was kitsch in its imitation and repetitive duplication of Japanese art and text. The colour determined the carpet choice, which led to the collection of furniture and ornaments. The décor follows the style of the wallpaper in terms of 1970s bohemia, with vertical orange and brown stripes on the coffee table, gold chrome glass table, crocheted owl hangings and a reproduction of a photo of an ocean scene with a sunrise. There is a degree of ambiguity within the family with the age difference between the man and woman. However, the sense is that they have finished travelling, to settle down and raise their children. The female is separated from the family and her gaze is directed at the viewer. Her expression is a mixture of angst and isolation. The man/father appears to be keeping them together. The ashtray placed in the middle of the room seems out of place and scale but is proportionate with the children. The picture appears to shine down creating the light that is hitting their hair and her face, illuminating the coffee table, an item that is definitely not suitable for children.

8. Burlesque

Figure 50 Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

I wanted this room's excessive floral and ornate décor to dominate the space, engulfing the family with memories. The older woman is placed in a position of authority and there is a suggestion that this style of decoration would be associated with her, especially as she wears the same colour as some of the furnishings. The man and woman could be her children or son and daughter-in-law. There is a possible resemblance in their appearance and a suggestion of an exotic past, which exists elsewhere. The feathers and dance costumes displayed on the walls tell the story of the older woman's possible past as a dancer. All the subjects look towards the viewer with a suggestion of pride. The mirror has a halo effect on the woman, reflecting leafy suburbia and this, combined with the frontal positioning of the subjects, mirrors the portraits in the background. The floral carpet meeting the floral wallpaper flattens the appearance of the room adding to the sense of overpowering decoration.

9. Grandma's kitchen

Figure 51: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

The style of this room was loosely based on my grandparent's house and could be considered more authentic in terms of adhering to one era, (1950s). The feminine quality of this room suggests that either the man hasn't chosen the décor or that he has an obsession with nostalgia. His casual attire and posed yet comfortable, slightly feminine position, suggests that he is in his home environment or possibly that of his mother. I felt that this figure appeared to be taking advantage of a situation in some way as he reads the paper and drinks coffee. The orange suitcase to his right suggests movement to or from the home. As with all the rooms there is a controlled placement of all the ornaments. This is contrasted by the open drawer and tea towel, which is possibly the man's intervention into a woman's space. As with the other rooms there is a clock, but the time appears not to match the light. The wind, created by the outdoor location, under the tablecloth gives an unusual floating appearance. The light has a staged and unnatural appearance.

10. Clowns, kittens and dolphins

Figure 52: Untitled, From the series Keeping up Appearances, 2010

This room evolved after finding the terrarium discussed on page 68. This item's duality influenced the symmetry of the room. The chairs mirror each other, the two birds in the terrarium under the clown diptyches on the wall. There are also two kittens and an ornament of two dolphins. The irony of the sad clowns, playful kittens and dolphins is seen in the juxtaposition of the occupants' unhappy dispositions. Her posture is powerful yet defiant, and her attention appears to be more with her dog and more at home in the environment. His body language is less confident and he looks away almost in disgust. Our eye is drawn to the broken symmetry of the table, which leads us to his gaze and the 'ugly' ornaments, including ceramic flowers, once again weakly imitating nature, just as the terrarium does. Formally the bleached-out tones of the decor push the darker elements of the subjects forward in the space, creating an appearance of the room floating around them. The clock is a dominating element, suggesting time frozen or passing slowly.

Final Presentation

I have chosen to present the work for my final submission in two forms, large scale banners and a series of light boxes.

Large scale banners

These images are a selection of constructed rooms that do not contain people. The scale of the prints and excess of décor are intended to overwhelm the viewer. The scale creates a greater sense of being 'in the picture' rather than looking at a picture. The experience is one of observation rather than emphasising the formation of a narrative journey that occurs when people inhabit the scenes.

Figure 53: Promotional material from Collaboration Pane

The idea of the large scale banners originated out of a collaboration with performance group MADE (Mature Artist Dance Experience) on a work titled *Pane*. I initiated this as part of my research into the theatrical nature of the domestic space. My primary role within the project was the creation of two photographic tableaux that depicted interior domestic spaces of a 1950s home. These were displayed in the shop fronts of commercial

premises as the set for a public performance. The dancers performed in front of the work, dressed in costumes that I designed to compliment the two dimensional back drops. These costumes were also two dimensional, made from wallpaper and card, then painted over to appear as three dimensional dresses.

Figure 54: Examples of paper doll costumes used in 'Pane', wallpaper and oil paint

A focus on the spatial qualities of these elements was significant as the intention was to experiment with the audience's perception of the environment both physically and conceptually. The photographic backdrops were printed digitally on vinyl at a scale which was larger than life size. This evoked both a sense of a theatrical 'drop down' tableaux similar to painted backdrops used in early theatre productions as well as 'shrinking' the dancers to make them appear doll like. This was also emphasised by the costumes which resembled a cut-out paper doll dress.

The choreography of the dance sequence used movements such as serving guests from imaginary trays, childlike regressions and robotic puppet-like actions. The movements combined with the visual elements to reinforce a

theme of the presentation of the self and the home as a façade. Masking reality with decorative camouflages such as wallpaper and pretty dresses, the dancers were contained in the window spaces heightening the sense of entrapment and control that existed within the domestic environment personified by the 1950s 'housewife'. The reaction of the audience including passing commuters was both that of fascination and humour. Feedback came in the form of people relating their memories and associations with the décor and the paper doll elements. There was a general atmosphere of reverie that I attributed to respect for the dancers and what they represented, the audiences female relatives. There was also an enquiry about what was occurring and the message that was being conveyed. An anecdotal situation which supported this was a large group of young people, mildly intoxicated and on their way to a large music festival passing the windows during a performance. They watched and were transformed into a quiet group of onlookers. They later moved on without a sound as if transformed by an association, that these performers could have been their mothers or grandmothers, monitoring their behaviour. This, I feel was enhanced by the strength of the visual association.

Figure 55: Documentation of performance of 'Pane'

The experimentation with scale and presentation of the photographs led to the decision to include large billboard sized work in the final MFA submission. The combination of the scale and the digital printing effects on

Figure 56: Documentation of performance of 'Pane'

plastic that flattens the image, allowed the work to be viewed as if in the environment, yet with an awareness of its facade, further emphasising the significance and use of décor as a tool for both the concealment of or a way of representing a persona.

This project not only allowed me to experiment with the presentation of my work but also informed my exploration into the theatrical nature of domesticity within a collaboration that shared these conceptual links.

Figure 57: Documentation of banner hung in exhibition titled 'Laughter', Cast Gallery, Hobart

Having hung these tableaux in two Hobart exhibition spaces, CAST Gallery and The Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, the impact of the work is different to the collaborative work in the commercial shop front. It is important to note that I consider the work created for *Pane* as site specific whereas the banners displayed in my MFA submission have been created for exhibiting in a gallery space. By removing the glass barrier of the shop window and removing the scale of the performers and their context, the work was at odds with its environment. These works had an illusionary quality from a distance, but on closer inspection their two dimensionality became the dominating characteristic. The viewer only became aware of scale when viewing someone in front of it, as demonstrated in figure 57 and 58. The positioning of a home environment within the parametres of

a gallery space challenged perceptions of the domestic environment being presented as art.[34] Feedback given in presentations regarding this work was that "It 'just' reminded them of their grandmother's front room", emhasising the 'just' as negative which could be seen as an example that the domestic space was not worthy of display. I metaphorically compare the works to a theatrical backdrop. The backdrops that appear in stage plays are used for example, to change day to night, whereas with these works I am changing an exhibition space into a domestic space, which restates the theatrical nature of the domestic space, that is 'homes' being dressed like a stage creating a story.

Figure 58 Documentation of banner hung in exhibition titled 'Trajectories',
Long Gallery Gallery, Hobart

Light boxes

In contrast, the display of the entire series of images that include the 'families' is presented in the form of a row of light boxes, each 80 x 120cms. The light boxes are used to evoke a sense of the images as illuminated rooms. Similar to looking into a house from outside at night when the lights are on, this device also creates a voyeuristic atmosphere as if peering into someone's private space. The light emphasises depth and exaggerates the colour used within the photographs. There is the reference to the use of

34 "It 'just' reminded' them of their grandmother's front room", emhasising the 'just' as negative which could be seen as an example that the domestic space was not worthy of display.

illuminated images in advertising as an extension to the idea of the home as a commercially manufactured spaces.[35] The arrangement of the light boxes running along two walls as a series encourages the viewer to observe the work as a collection. This is by making connections between images with their similarities and differences revealing some of the formulas used in their creation.

I have experimented with the use of light boxes in a previous series titled *Out of Home*, which was exhibited in three different arrangements and venues which allowed me to assess the readings and effectiveness of the differing installations.

Figure 59: Constructed model for Broken up room

Broken up room

This final piece is presented as a fragmented single image of an empty room created with several small light boxes. The light boxes once again can be perceived as a view into a home with the fragmentation likened to several small windows in the wall of a house. The breaking up of the image is intended to both obscure the viewing of the room while emphasising particular elements within the space. This also reinforces the signifigance of the objects arranged within the room. I am also referencing

35 Also referenced by the banners as they are printed with the same technique and size as billboards.

the piecing together of a home and its histories, one box may contain an ornament handed down from a previous generation another may be part of a chair bought at a gargage sale and another could be carefully selected wallpaper that they proudly put up themselves. These are all fragments of a life displayed as one whole within a living space. This presentation interrogates the idea of how, when viewing a domestic environment, we base our judgements on visual evidence, adding our own interpretations.

Conclusion

This project has broadened my artistic enquiry into the suburban domestic interior. Every stage of research further informed my process and ideas. By positioning a constructed domestic scene in a public area of a suburban street, an immediate juxtaposition between public and private was formed by bringing the inside out. From the outset, a methodical approach to the construction and design of each individual room was a necessity. Through experimentation I formulated a pattern of working that resulted in a finished environment that could exist as a representation of a real room, yet would encourage further enquiry into its artifice. I collected models for the rooms in the same way I collected chairs, wallpaper and ornaments, to assemble a household. The occupants of the rooms activated the space whilst the ornaments assisted with background narratives. The final body of work is presented as a corridor of illuminated domestic tableaux, which contrasts with the large scale photographic 'facades' of empty rooms in the adjacent gallery space. The light boxes have an illusionary depth which encourages further inspection into evidential detail, whilst the large banners lead the viewer in from a distance, their deception being interrupted by a slight rippling in the banners vinyl or the rumpled end as it meets the gallery floor.

The process of taking an out-door space and turning it into a series of interior living environments impacted the work both formally and conceptually. The fact that the set was outdoors meant that working was often influenced by climatic conditions, which dictated when I could shoot. Shooting into a corner, which was illuminated by outside rather than interior light, exposed the artifice to the viewer, emphasising the staged nature of the work, while the availability of the models and props meant that some assemblage of rooms and people were left up to chance. These factors created a process driven form of working. For instance, the discovery of a particular floor covering or sofa would lead to the invention of a new room with its own imaginary story. A cold day would create a particular expression on a person's face and warm sun would encourage someone to position his or her body differently.

Creating the work publicly in a suburban street also contributed to the

way I approached the assemblage of each room. The act of transforming functional space into a convincing living room became performative and emphasised what I was exploring – namely, the theatricality of a domestic environment. I was literally turning the home into a stage. Questions of why I was creating these spaces from passers by encouraged me to evaluate and reflect on my central aim.

The use of a constructed outdoor set to photograph a domestic interior is one of my crucial contributions to the field of fabrication photography. Artists in this field such as Anne Zahalka, in her series *Open House*, and Angela Stassheim, have examined the relationship the home has with identity using strategies of re-arrangement and manipulation of what is presented to the viewer. However, their photographs are created within people's real home interiors rather than using constructed sets. Other photographers such as Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson have constructed life-size sets in their entirety and, similarly to my project, examine concepts relating to domesticity and suburbia. The differences are that Jeff Wall does not reveal any process or artifice while Gregory Crewdson moves beyond the possibilities of his scenarios being real.

The importance placed on the ornamentation and décor in my work is another significant contribution I am making to this field. Décor that was sourced purely from secondhand outlets created a particular aesthetic which allowed me to explore the idea of found objects having an embedded history. The detailing of the rooms took precedence over narrative. Although the rooms contain occupants, it is the space itself that is the portrait. Rather than reading lines in a face or interpreting a smile, the attention is given to the placement of an ornament or selection of a painting, because it is these things that are telling the story. If we consider the occupants of each room to be an extension of the room or additional living props, their posturing and appearance further extends the possibilities of the viewer's interpretation of a suggested narrative.

The images effectively transport the viewer into another place, inviting them into fabricated homes and lives. The viewer endeavours to construct a narrative from the scenarios presented, but at the same time notices something is not quite right. Gradually s/he becomes aware of the artifice

- that what s/he is looking at is a 'fake' rather than a 'real' interior. The immersive nature of the large-scale banners creates a trompe l'oeil effect while the illuminated light boxes, seduce the viewer into these worlds, reminiscent of looking into a house at night when the lights are on inside but it is dark outside. Vibrant colour palettes and provocative assemblages may comfort the viewer but this is only temporary. As with any trickery, cracks in the deception are evident and once the pretense is exposed, the viewer begins to question everything.

Discussions on the truth of photography have existed since its conception. Although a mechanical object is being used to replicate what is being seen, there are always varying degrees of manipulation. Whether it is merely telling someone to smile for a family snapshot or a large-scale photograph of entirely constructed tableaux, some form of intervention has occurred. However, as viewers, we still carry the associations of photography representing something that exists or has existed. My invented suburban interiors are attempting to interrogate the liminal space between truth and fiction. The only element that can be considered authentic is what the viewer brings to the work.

To pursue a photographic investigation into the theatricality of the domestic space, it seemed appropriate to use theatrical devices to create the work for my MFA submission. By building and dressing a set, positioning actors to bring the set to life and embedding a narrative to be observed by an audience, my methods can be compared to theatre or film. However, the resulting work is a series of photographs, which unlike a film still, exist in isolation. They have no beginning or end. Each viewer makes their own evaluations based on associations and experience they bring to what they are viewing. The assessments the viewer makes are influenced by how convincing the theatrical devices are. This can also be a metaphor for what occurs in the homes of suburbia. People present their own households using theatrical devices to portray a particular image of their own individual stories.

Figure 60: Shot from my real home

Where to from here

Figure 61: Portrait from Princess, Nicole Robson, 2010

During the process of completing this Masters submission I have participated in further collaborations with MADE. The latest project took the form of an exhibition and dance collaboration in the Theatre Royal Hobart entitled *Princess*. I was engaged as the art director which primarily involved the creation of 10 portraits which were displayed above the dancers incrementally as they performed. The creation of the portraits involved firstly shooting landscape images of Tasmania then printing them on vinyl backdrops similar to the banner in my submission. I then photographed the dancers dressed in costumes designed by local artist Leonie Oakes. Symbolic ornaments from my collection were placed around them.

The work involved various levels of visual illusion including Tasmanian landscape banners for backdrops, 1970s faux rococo ornaments and furniture, wigs and paper costuming. Even the ornate frames are part of the illusionary qualities digitally added at the end.

The final results mirrored classical 18th Century portraits, which often included a seated figure of nobility with the land they owned painted in behind them. These portraits mimic the idea of stepping into royalty and this becomes a form of staging and duplicity that is created within their identity. A Princess is also a symbol of a girl's dreams and aspirations presented to them in forms of play acting and fairy tales. The women in the portraits experienced this process of 'dress up' and therefore also encountered some of the transformative emotion of becoming a 'princess'.

Figure 62: Portrait from Princess, Nicole Robson, 2010

Figure 63: Dress Rehearsal of Princess

I am currently experimenting with approaches to a new series which involves taking domestic settings away from the fixed position of a set and moving them into outdoor locations such as farms, sporting fields, suburban carparks and other public arenas. Within these images I am also positioning a life size wallpaper mural of a Swiss Alpine scene behind the domestic construction and including the surrounding environment. In this work I am hoping to explore an urban interest in nature in the context of our own environment, challenging artificiality with authenticity.

Figure 64: Trial of New Work

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Appendixes

Figure 65: Documentation of submission installation

Figure 65: Documentation of submission installation

NICOLE ROBSON

CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

2012   Masters of Fine Art (Research) University of Tasmania

2007   Bachelor of Fine Arts with 1st Class Honours,
       University of Tasmania

2005   Bachelor of Fine Art, Double Major: Painting &
       Photography, University of Tasmania

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2012   *Head On Photo Festival*, short listed for the Head On portrait
       prize, Customs House, Sydney, NSW
       Here, Edmund Pearce Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria

2011   *reGeneration 2: Tomorrows Photographers Today*,
       International traveling exhibition: Aperture Foundation Gallery,
       New York; Rencontres d'Arles, Arles, France; Michaelis
       School of Fine Art, Cape Town, South Africa; Pingyao
       International Photography Festival, Pingyao, China; Flash
       Forward Festival, Toronto, Canada; Galleria Carla Sozzani,
       Milano, Italy; FotoWeek DC 2010, Washington DC; Center
       Gallery, Miami
       Facing Forward, Forward Thinking Museum, Online gallery

2010   *Dream Home*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney NSW
       Laughter, CAST Gallery, Tasmania
       Trajectories, Salamanca Arts Centre, Tasmania
       reGeneration2: Tomorrows Photographers Today, Musee de
       l'Elysee, Switzerland and Thames and Hudson Publication

2009   *Tasmania 1:100,000 Mapping the Island*: 10 Days on the Island,
       IXL Atrium Hunter Street, Hobart

2008   *great expectations #3*, Bett Gallery, Hobart
       Out of Home (with Shea Bresnehan), Inflight Gallery, Hobart

2008   *Hatched*, National Graduate exhibition, Perth Institute for
       Contemporary Arts, Perth, WA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012   *Keeping up Appearances*, Edmund Pearce Gallery, Melbourne,
Victoria

2008   *great expectations Part 2*, Sidespace Gallery, Salamanca Arts
Centre, Hobart
great Expectations Part 1, Avago Gallery & Under The Stairs
Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart

COLLABORATIONS

2010   *Princess*, Collaboration with MADE, Theatre Royal Hobart,
Tasmania
Junction 2010 (Regional arts Australia National Conference)
PANE: Collaborative art installation/performance work

2009   Brisbane Festival: Under the Radar, PANE: Collaborative art
installation/performance work

2008   *PANE:* Collaborative art installation/performance work
Spotlight Shop Front Window. Liverpool Street, Hobart

AWARDS

2011   Marie Edwards Travelling Scholarship in Visual Arts,
Craft and Design

2011   Artsbridge, Arts Tasmania travelling fund

2011   Tasmanian Regional Arts Fund (for to travel to New York)