

BOROONDARA  
ARTS



# Shelter in Place

TOWN HALL GALLERY  
HAWTHORN ARTS CENTRE

SAT 10 JULY – SAT 25 SEPTEMBER 2021

# Build us up: exploring our relationship with place and space

The built environment does much more than simply provide shelter for our species. Through the disciplines of architecture, civil engineering, urban planning and design, we strive to create private and public spaces that can provide us with safety, comfort, belonging and a sense of identity. As time passes and society changes and develops, our urban landscape is in a constant state of flux. We design, we build, we decorate, we live, we damage, we renovate, we preserve, we abandon, we demolish, we rebuild. These structures become living and breathing relics of our experiences.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote that ‘inhabited space transcends geometrical space’<sup>1</sup> in his 1958 publication *La Poétique de l'Espace* (The Poetics of Space), a text which examines the emotional relationship between a space and the person who occupies it. A building embodies more than just its physical dimensions, materials and features. Over time, a space inhabited by humans becomes a repository of meaning, memories and experiences, because we live, grow and transform within and with the space. Bachelard maintains this relationship is a two-way street – we inhabit a building, and a building inhabits us.

‘Shelter in Place’ brings together seven Australian artists whose works interrogate themes such as materiality and memory, ownership and the “Australian Dream”, and dispossession and displacement.

Through the mediums of painting, film, sculpture and installation, the artists explore the intangible connection between the human experience and the spaces we create and live in.

The practice of multi-disciplinary artist Shannon Lyons examines the complex relationship between art and the context in which it is made. For this exhibition Lyons has created a new installation, ‘Loneliness is a crowded room’ (2021), which takes the modest footprint of one architectural environment and asserts it onto the floor of another.

A combination of plain-coloured and garishly-patterned reclaimed carpet tiles, arranged in a rectangle on the gallery floor, reflects the dimensions of the artist’s place of residence – an apartment that ‘offers a retreat from the outside world, but quickly came to feel claustrophobic during recent lockdowns.’<sup>2</sup> The carpet tiles, salvaged from various institutional interiors such as offices, classrooms and doctors’ waiting rooms, are laid in a visually dissonant, seemingly random arrangement, with no discernible pattern to follow. Upon the carpet sits an acrylic bathtub supported by a pine frame, which houses the artist’s collection of houseplants. By grouping materials from large bureaucratic and commercial spaces together in close proximity to more personal and domestic forms, the work conflates the familiar with the strange, the public with the private.

Mason Kimber's practice explores the connection between architecture, place and memory using the mediums of painting, sculpture, fresco and installation. 'Strata' (2021) and 'Strata (Step)' (2021) were created during walks around the artist's former neighbourhood in Darlinghurst, Sydney. Kimber delved into researching the history of the area, learning the alleyway that most fascinated him used to be a sandstone quarry. He also unearthed personal connections to the place, discovering that the gallery Kronenberg Mais Wright (who represents Kimber in Sydney) used to be a workers cottage of a stonemason who helped build the National Art School, where Kimber now teaches. The material of local sandstone became a starting point for what Kimber explains was a 'surface archaeology' of the area, where the artist took sculptural impressions from architectural surfaces using gypsum, resulting in a series of fragments that act as records of his encounters.

Kimber manifests his memory of each place by capturing and reworking these materials into new compositions. As Neha Kale writes, '[Kimber's] sculptural reliefs reflect the ways in which we are shaped by the places we move through. But for Kimber, making memories isn't a passive process. It's an act of excavation. We get to know ourselves by looking closely at the world around us, understand what lies beneath the surface by giving the surface itself a physical form.'<sup>3</sup>

The disorienting paintings by Kevin Chin are created through a collage development process to test our perspective and sense of place. Chin merges land formations with built structures in unconventional ways to explore how economic, cultural and social structures shape



the world in which we live. Created in response to a residency in the US, Chin's compositions examine who has built what, who takes ownership and who has the right to place. In 'Castle Under the Sky' (2019), Chin uses the geometric shape of a house rooftop as a motif that repeats throughout the composition. Chin explains the significance of the inverted 'V' shape: 'I remember being taught through nursery rhymes as a child how to make this "house shape" by putting my arms over my head, and also drawing this shape over and over, whenever asked to draw my house. It's a shape I associate with security and home-making.'<sup>4</sup> The deliberate twist of a common phrase in the painting's title alludes to the many ways the aspiration of 'home' can be inherently unequal, such as housing affordability, the plight of refugees displaced from their homes, and the tightening of national borderlines amidst debate of who belongs and who does not.

'Another Rung' (2019) features migrant workers within an amalgamation of landscapes to draw attention to their role in the creation of place and the building of a nation. The landscapes have different origins, representing the hybrid cultural identities of many Australians and how this affects feelings of home, shelter and safety. Through these works, Chin investigates how we generate a sense of belonging by piecing different fragments together

to find our place in the world – or at the very least, makes ourselves feel “at home”, wherever that physically might be.

In a world of seemingly never-ending, fast-paced urban development, Polly Stanton’s ‘Three Rooms’ (2014) invites us to take pause and consider the impact. Created during a residency in northwest Iceland, this audio-visual work documents the interior remnants of an abandoned farmhouse (Eyðibýli) in the remote sub-arctic region of Iceland’s Westfjords. As the artist explains, ‘with thousands of empty farms scattered across the landscape, these ruins stand as a reminder of the country’s rapid societal change shaped through the commodification of natural resources and the accelerated rise of large-scale industrialisation. As commercial industry drained the land of small family-owned farms, it conversely shaped a new landscape of Eyðibýli – empty spaces of material pasts and hauntological futures.’<sup>15</sup>



Stanton takes the viewer on a visual and sonic exploration of the different rooms of the house, capturing the life the deserted building still possesses despite the lack of human inhabitancy and activity. Instilled with history, the spaces of the house act as autonomous and sentient bodies from another time. Through this sensory attentiveness to space,

‘Three Rooms’ considers the ‘silent force of dispossession and the erosion of community and place.’<sup>16</sup>

Filipino-born artists Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan create mixed media artworks out of collected and discarded materials to explore themes of place and displacement, settlement and resettlement, memory and community. Since the couple relocated with their five children from the Philippines to Australia in 2006, the medium of assemblage has become a symbol of their migrant experience. Their projects often consist of large-scale sculptural installations comprised of thousands of miniature cardboard houses that have been created by members of the public, resulting in an ever-growing village within the gallery space. Their makeshift installations, reminiscent of shanty towns created and occupied by the displaced and homeless, become a ‘poignant example of transience – of humans’ attempt to create permanence’<sup>17</sup> within the built environment.

Though connected to the artists’ own personal stories of migration, their projects are also inspired by the fragile houses and nomadic existence of the marginalised Badjao people in the southwestern Philippines. The Badjao community live mainly in fragile stilt houses on the margins on the ocean, and are being forcibly relocated inland away from their homes along the coast. By collecting such accounts of displacement and transforming them through meticulous reorganisation, the Aquilizans intend for their projects to build, gather and dissect collective memories with new hopes for the future.

'The Australian Ugliness' (2018) is a three-channel video work by Eugenia Lim that pays homage to leading Melbourne modernist Robin Boyd and his book of the same name, while exploring the ethics and aesthetics of Australia's built environment. A gold-suited figure known as The Ambassador, performed by Lim, moves through more than thirty sites and spaces across Australia, interrogating the diversity, liveability and sustainability of our nation's architecture and the "Australian Dream".

Boyd's text, published in 1960, is a harsh critique of the architectural aesthetic of Australia's suburbs. On reading the book, Lim was most struck by 'the way Boyd links what he saw as the national tendency to settle for what's "skin deep", surface, and a "she'll be right" attitude, to a more unsettling complacency that leads to the racism and violence of colonial settlement and the White Australia

Policy.'<sup>8</sup> In Lim's work, places of lesser privilege are contrasted with the grand icons of Australian architecture, interrogating why beautiful and grandiose architectural design is reserved only for the affluent. As Lim states, 'the work is a challenge to both the [architectural] profession and the public: architecture shapes us, and we all must have agency in this process of who we become.'<sup>9</sup>

The artists in 'Shelter in Place' encourage us to reflect on our own lived experiences and interactions with built environments, both at a communal and a personal level, and how we might find solace and belonging within them. Living at a time of a global pandemic has further encouraged this self-reflection. The works in this exhibition challenge us to think about how we imagine, design and sustain these places and spaces, and in turn, what they say about us both individually and collectively as a society.

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1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 2014), 82.

2 Shannon Lyons, email correspondence, March 22, 2021.

3 Neha Kale, *Mason Kimber: Strata*, exhibition catalogue, Kronenberg Mais Wright, Sydney, 2021.

4 Kevin Chin, email correspondence, March 29, 2021.

5 Polly Stanton, email correspondence, March 4, 2021.

6 Ibid.

7 Michael Young, "Set Adrift Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan", *ArtAsiaPacific* 81 (2012), accessed 26 May 2021, <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/81/SetAdriftAlfredoAndIsabelAquilizan>.

8 Natalie King, "Quiet Disobedience: the work of Eugenia Lim", *Eugenia Lim: The Ambassador*, exhibition catalogue, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, 2019, 19.

9 Ibid., 21.



**COVER:**

Eugenia Lim, still detail from 'The Australian Ugliness', 2018, three-channel video installation with six-channel audio, 33 minutes 58 seconds duration, image courtesy of the artist and STATION. Photography by Tom Ross.

**CENTRE SPREAD:**

Kevin Chin, 'Another Rung', 2019, oil on Italian linen, 138 x 199cm, image courtesy of the artist, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney, and THIS IS NO FANTASY, Melbourne.

Polly Stanton, still from 'Three Rooms', 2014, HD video with surround sound, 9 minutes 25 seconds duration, image courtesy of the artist.

**ABOVE:**

Mason Kimber, detail from 'Strata', 2021, acrylic, gypsum, resin, wax, pigment leader line and steel frame, 200 x 170 x 45cm, image courtesy of the artist, Kronenberg Mais Wright, Sydney, and Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne.

**OPENING HOURS**

10am – 4pm, Mon to Fri

Midday – 4pm, Saturday

360 Burwood Road

Hawthorn Victoria

03 9278 4770



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