

**School of Built Environment**

**Real and Imagined Suburbia: using painting to  
explore allusions to promise and reality**

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## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

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## Abstract

Identifying with the fields of painting and architecture, this project questions the staged perfection of the display home and endeavours to develop new understandings of the Australian suburban landscape. Through a combination of abstracted and representational painting techniques, I engage with the notion of place to explore the duality of promise and reality in suburbia.

The pervading feelings of promise encouraged by the promotion of display homes are reimagined to sympathise with the complexities and nuanced sensations of attachment and longing. This felt connection to place draws on architecture-based scholars Kim Dovey, Lars Spuybroek, Gilles Deleuze and Neil Leach to contextualise the way suburbia can be explored through painting as a platform for reflections on place, both real and imagined.

The display home refers to the commercial homes built by construction companies to showcase their designs and motivate buyers, and can be referred to interchangeably as model homes, project homes or show homes. These homes are built as part of display villages in new housing estates and can be used for up to two years as uninhabited, fully furnished spaces to be visited by potential buyers. They are later sold off and used as homes to live in. I focus on the display home and the swimming pool in this painting project. These motifs are used to explore the complexities of desire, hope and seduction in relation to suburbia in Australia. The aspiration embedded in the great Australian dream of home ownership and general lifestyle seduction is used in the promotion of the display home. I use this imagery, along with the swimming pool motif, to question the promise of the display home and allude to more complex feelings tied to notions of place.

Using a methodology of action research, this project develops a visual language for suggesting real and imagined spaces. My painting project experiments with atmosphere, hue, tone and composition to indicate a sense of menace and comfort. 'Menace' refers to feelings analogous to the impossible promise of perfection that defines the experience of the display home, and 'comfort' refers to associations of attachment, connection and belonging to the lived experience of home.

I reference contemporary and historical artists who use painting and photography to explore the urban landscape and its allusion to promise, illusion and feeling—namely, Callum Morton, Gerhard Richter, Robert F. Hammerstiel, Joanna Lamb, Giorgio de Chirico, Mark Rothko and David Hockney. In considering other artists' approaches to landscape, I employ a reflective and self-evaluative approach to painting that points to the threshold between the lived and un-lived suburban landscape. This method is equally informed by the portrayal of suburbia in filmic narratives, specifically films that use the swimming pool and house façade as metaphors for hidden, darker associations with place.

Stemming from a curiosity about the traceless perfection of the display home and the evocative potential of the swimming pool, I use painting to reimagine the display home in order to engage with atmospheric feelings of place in suburbia. My exploration of the Australian suburban landscape is informed by theoretical understandings of architectural space, suburban planning, and off-the-plan housing design. The process for gaining insight into these theories is centred on practice-led research through painting. My painting practice embraces the struggle and uncertainty that is involved in creating and evaluating pictorial order in painting, combining abstraction and representation to sympathise with notions of messiness and the unachievable ideal of the display home. This project advocates and affirms the power of oil painting to affect through sensation and sympathy – it validates painting as a vehicle for gaining insight and conveying knowledge in relation to the sensory and evocative potential of place and home.

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## Introduction

This project explores representations of the contemporary Australian suburban landscape through an exploration of place, both real and imagined. The notion of 'place' refers to spatial understandings of the conceptual and analytical ways we make sense of the world (Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine 2004). Place in suburbia is constructed by lived experience, and this relationship is expressed through belonging, attachment and feeling. In considering the complexity of place, this research focuses on the intersection of promise and reality that arises from representations of the display home. As such, the project addresses the question: *Through representations of the display home, in what ways can landscape painting allude to real and imagined experiences of suburbia?* The 'real' refers to analytical and conceptual understandings of place in suburbia as well as personal connections, memories, sympathies and attunements that are attached to familiar landscapes. The 'imagined' refers to fictional representations of suburbia in art, film, literature and popular culture. I draw on these complex understandings of the contemporary suburban environment and the perceived, conceived and imagined spatial relationships of place. My creative research brings attention to ways representation and abstraction can be used in painting to encourage associative interpretations of the landscape. My practice develops a methodology for understanding the display home and its role in both shaping and reflecting values of attachment and aspiration in suburbia.

Through practice-led research, this project principally draws on contemporary landscape painting. Theories on the social relations of place are drawn from the fields of suburban design and architecture to inform my research. I focus on the image of the display home

and in particular the forms of the façade, swimming pool and garden that define the ideal Australian suburban archetype. My research will establish that this archetype is implicitly associated with feelings of aspiration, desire and longing. I will demonstrate how landscape painting can be used as a way to conflate the sensation of multiple and complex understandings of place in connection with the home. I subsequently foreground an underlying feeling of menace in relation to the comfort, security and seduction of the display home, conveyed through concepts of sympathy and sensation in painting.

Since the proliferation of the Australian suburbs in the 1950s, home ownership has served as an aspirational marker of success and security. Australian writer and curator David Broker (2016) points to how these feelings have been explored in Australian art. He identifies the parody of uniformity and banality in John Brack's paintings, Howard Arkley's celebration of suburban iconography, and Robin Boyd's (1960) critique of Australian suburban architecture in *The Australian Ugliness*. This suspicion, critique and celebration continues in contemporary landscape painting. Drawing on this history, painting is used to explore the underlying tensions lingering beneath the image of the ideal.

This project aims to reimagine the overwhelmingly positive sentiments associated with the media's portrayal of the display home to consider the traces and messiness that are missing from the image of the ideal. Dutch architect and theorist Lars Spuybroek (2011, 258) describes advertising as the lowest form of decoration, claiming that "all there is left for us to do is to deliver the images at the doorsteps of objects, trying to quasi-repair it all by projecting the implanted memory of a happy life onto a thing." He calls for the integration of sympathy into design to authenticate the felt relationship between people and things. If the display home as an advertisement encourages desire, aspiration and longing for an impossible ideal, then painting can be used to contest these attitudes by alluding to feelings attached to lived memory and experience, engaging with sympathy in a tactile way.

I draw on the promise and seduction of the display home, and compare this to personal connections to home as a place of familiarity and belonging. This dual focus intends to make more explicit the tension that exists in the aspirational, desirable and impossible image of the ideal. In this research, the house is defined as the physical structure used for habitation. This structure includes the floor plan, building materials, landscaping, and the suburban location. The home refers to a place of belonging and care. According to

Dutch cultural anthropologist Irene Cieraad (2006, ix), “our primary emotional connections are shaped in the domestic arena of the home.” This notion of home being tied to emotional attachment and memory is derived from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1964, 4), who says that the notion of home “reveals an attachment that is native in some way to the primary function of inhabiting.” I will demonstrate how painting allows for the viewer to consider sensed and felt connections to place and belonging by exploring the evocative potential of architectural motifs and the swimming pool.

I grew up in a suburb that was planned in the 1920s and followed an imported planning form known as the ‘garden suburb’ model. Floreat is leafy, spacious, and separated from the ocean by a large native bush reserve. According to American historian Stanley Buder (1990), the garden suburb planning style in Australia was based on utopian visions of experimental city expansion first championed by British urban planner Ebenezer Howard in the late nineteenth century. The underlying ideology and utopian vision of the garden suburb was centred on ways landscape could be used as a tool to influence the way people felt, with the aim of encouraging virtuous, spiritual and philosophic connections to place (Buder 1990). Australian academic Lee Stickells (2004) identifies the positive utopian goals of garden suburb planning and the limitations caused by its continuing influence. The constraints of neo-traditional suburban planning are also acknowledged by Australian academic Tony Hall (2010) in his book *The Life and Death of the Australian Backyard*. He discusses the potential socio-cultural and economic reasons for homogenous suburban configurations, as seen in display villages in Perth, which differ from the original spacious and garden-focused suburbs of the previous era.

This project began with a sense of curiosity about new suburban housing developments in Perth, and the manufactured ideas of community and homeliness used to promote them. I am interested in the temporary state of display homes in these developments. These houses are built by construction companies and designed to motivate buyers. The display home exists at a paradoxical moment between serving as a house that is completely furnished, decorated and perfectly manicured, and before being sold off and inhabited as a home. The potential of this uninhabited house provides a platform for playing out the desire and hope that is attached to the archetypal home in Australia. The constructed nature of the display home presents a curious staged display of domestic space, adorned with advertisement banners, signs and brochures. The display home is complicit in seducing prospective buyers with a luxurious and desirable image of home.



Figure 1. (Left) Honeywood display village, Wandi, WA, photograph.

Figure 2. (Right) Shorehaven display village, Alkimos, WA, photograph.

In order to understand and reinterpret the seductive nature of the display home for this project, I have collected advertising material and photographic documentation from display villages such as Honeywood in Wandi (Figure 1) and Shorehaven in Alkimos (Figure 2). New housing developments across the Perth metropolitan area have been the main focus, where the estates comprise affordable homes directed at first homebuyers and middle-income families. Australian academic Kim Dovey (1992, 177) positions the display home as “a very substantial piece of the market” but acknowledges that research on this housing type excludes “the bottom (which is the rental), the top (which is custom-designed) and all types other than the detached.” These materials are collected to use as sources for my drawings and paintings. I have also used these visits to gain first-hand insight into the seductive qualities of the advertising and imagery. To understand the paradox between promise and reality that is identified within this landscape, I draw upon research that examines new suburban planning models and how they reflect a continuing yet slightly compromised ideal of the traditional Australian suburban archetype (Hall 2010; Stickells 2004; Glendinning 2010).

While the imagery used for the work is collected from local examples of display homes, the trends in new houses built by construction companies are comparable across Australia and resonate with homogenous suburban aesthetics elsewhere in Western societies. I compare new suburban landscapes with ones that I have come to know through time and experience. When compared to the usual associations with occupancy, history, lived experience and memory of my everyday suburbia, the display home is superficial, synthetic and simulated. It is an ideal on one hand, but it can also be viewed as an alienating, menacing reflection of an unsustainable suburban dream.

The display home continues to follow a pattern of low-rise, low-density, single-family dwellings in a garden setting, which reflects aspects of Australian cultural identity. As Dovey (1999, 139) states, “The ‘model home’ is a mirror which at once reflects and reproduces a suburban dream world. And it is a mirror in which we might read the suburban condition and some of the cultural values that drive it.” The current suburban condition in Australia can be understood in relation to British-Swiss philosopher Alain de Botton’s (2004, 4) notion of “status anxiety” in the Western world. He defines this term as “a worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung or are about to fall to a lower one” (De Botton 2004, 4). The unending strive for status occurs through making comparisons to others’ lives, and the dream of home ownership has a role in perpetuating the feeling of status anxiety.

The focus of this exegesis is not on the reasons behind how social, political, economic and cultural factors shape or reflect suburban architecture. Instead I use this research on suburbia and garden suburb planning to understand the complex and interconnected relationship between suburbia, architecture and culture (Stern, Fisherman and Tilove 2013; Hall 2010; Stickells 2004; Buder 1990; Ferber, Healy and McAuliffe 1994). These connections reveal the continuing and seemingly unchanged aspiration underlying the great Australian dream of home ownership. This aspiration is explored in relation to the lived attachment to home that is developed over time. The literature that I draw on for this exegesis positions these as two interrelated ideas. I experiment with painting to broach the complexity of the *promise* and deep-seated lived *realities* of home in a way that sympathetically combines the possibilities of abstraction and representation. This use of technique strives to move past conventional forms of evocation through explanatory representation to intentionally de-familiarise the landscape. The figurative motifs and abstracted spaces aim to provoke questions and imaginative responses to the work from the viewer. For me, painting also functions as a way to think through dualities in order to develop more complex understandings of place. By doing this, the work can engage with tactile sensations of seeing and feeling through the representation of the landscape.

The artists that have been drawn on in this exegesis are used to set up links to, and provide triggers for, the development of my project. Within the realm of visual art, I focus on works that respond to notions of promise and reality, feeling and landscape. Callum Morton, Gerhard Richter, Robert F. Hammerstiel, Joanna Lamb, Giorgio de Chirico, Mark Rothko and David Hockney have been selected as key artists whose work brings to the surface ideas that are dormant within my own work. By making comparisons through reflection

and practice, specific artworks have been influential in helping me to understand intuitive choices and make clear the discoveries that develop out of my painting process.

The process of painting, and the techniques that have developed out of experimentation and reflection, aim to create a sensed and felt connection with place in relation to suburbia. I explore French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's ([1981] 2005) notion of sensation in painting, and how planes, the body, and colour interact to create vibration and suggestive spaces. Further, Spuybroek's notion of sympathy is drawn on to demonstrate how the application of surface, colour and abstracted figuration can allude to real and imagined feelings of place. These feelings of place suggest connections between things rather than illustrating a defined narrative.

My research into suggestions of feeling and experience identifies with popular notions of the swimming pool as a place linked to aspiration and leisure in Western culture. Sarah Amelar and John Gendall propose that:

People once went to pools for sacred rites of bathing and immersion, as in ancient Greece and Rome. Now such aqueous oases have more to do with rites of leisure than anything else. And no matter how shallow or deep the experiences offered there, swimming pools remain fabricated environments—artificial bodies of water, whether rectilinear or kidney-shaped and lined in turquoise, or placid planks of liquid vanishing into the horizon. (2007, 87-89)

The pool can suggest a dual sensation of place in its associations with leisure and escape, and I describe these associations using the term *aqueous moments*. Through this practice-led research, different ways of representing water is explored to suggest complex and multiple allusions to place. The pool is anecdotally known as an iconic image of aspiration in Australia contemporary culture; it has become synonymous with a typical affluent suburban lifestyle. Drawing firstly on Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico, and then English artist David Hockney, I will explore creative insights into felt associations with water and how this motif, when painted, can lend itself to the suggestion of multiplicity, thresholds and sensation. In this project, aqueous moments are explored through varied ways of representing depth and ambiguity. Together with this swimming pool motif, the modern architectural features of display homes act as figures that allude to paradoxical notions of promise and reality.

The chapters in this exegesis are structured to reflect a timeline of cyclical and emergent understandings in my project. The discoveries are framed by an action research strategy, where my research methodology is informed by a critical and intuitive process of reflection and self-evaluation. This strategy of reflection and critique identifies with Paul McIntosh's (2010, 2) notion of action research and reflective practice as "ways in which experiences can be captured, noted, teased apart and reconstructed as deeper knowledge through personal insight and sharing." These experiences were tangled and complex, and realisations came to light through comparisons to my own body of work and to the work of other artists through viewing exhibitions and studying second hand photographic documentation of their work. The insights gained from this methodology are not presented as definitive, instead my approach aims to provoke a range of interpretive and creative responses that can generate new questions.

Practice-led research is used to connect painting to relevant cross-disciplinary fields of enquiry. Two exhibitions, *Structurally Sound* (2015) and *Paradise Point* (2015), have formed part of the structure for evaluating the creative component of the project and allowed a platform for feedback and critique from a wider audience. This research develops new and significant insights into the ways in which a contemporary painting practice can contribute to understandings of real and imagined experiences of suburbia through felt representations of place.

Chapter 1: The Display Home, Suburbia and Place provides definitions of the notions of 'home' and 'place' in relation to this project. The complexities of home and suburbia are explored through theoretical understandings of place, non-place and the uncanny. These understandings are considered in relation to the aspiration and longing reinforced by the image of the display home, which can be interpreted as reflecting social and cultural perceptions of the suburban ideal in Australia. I draw on my own experience of suburbia in an everyday context. This experience is contrasted with my reflection on new suburbs, where houses are in the state of becoming homes. Acknowledging this, the home is positioned as a place of care in contrast to the display home as one of artificiality. This duality sets up a tension between the felt experience of belonging and the traceless perfection of the display home as the basis for investigation in my practice-led research.

In Chapter 2: Visualising Conflicted Feelings of Alienation and Familiarity, the research responds to the desire and aspiration promoted by the image of the display home façade.

The façade is the focus of my first series of paintings as I begin to explore ways of de-familiarising the landscape to stimulate creative responses to the theoretical underpinnings of the project. To unpack the decisions that unfold during the making process, the notions of sympathy and mimesis are introduced, which provide understandings of the way feeling can be elicited through painting. The construction of surface as an illusion of two-dimensional space is explored as a way of encouraging atmospheric feeling to be implied through hue, tone and mark-making. I explain how the variation of surface is capitalised on to begin to explore metaphoric connections with the residue and messiness of the lived experience of home, and the strangeness of perfection when these traces are missing. Ideals of perfection are reframed as impossible, which is explored with reference to Callum Morton's parody of modernism in *International Style*. I compare my approach to representation to that of Gerhard Richter's *Seascape (Grey, Cloudy)*. The comparatively looser realism employed in my representation of the suburban landscape brings focus to the atmospheric feeling of alienation and familiarity that is conveyed in my work. Through these discoveries I am led to more acutely consider the role of realism and illusion in depicting a feeling of disquiet in the atmosphere, which can be used to question the impossible perfection of the display home.

In Chapter 3: Promise, Illusion and the Display Home, the unlived, perfect image of home is reimagined to consider menacing and comforting indications of feeling in relation to the suburban landscape that align with complex attachments to place. Building on the techniques used in Chapter 2, implied texture and depth is used in my paintings to describe the house, its windows, doorways, steps, and shadows in a more decisive way. The staged perfection of home is examined, drawing on French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia to position alternative understandings of the display home. Artist Robert F. Hammerstiel's photography-based satire of perfection and illusion is used to demonstrate ways heterotopic ideas can be addressed. This comparison compelled me to reflect on how painting can be used to question perfection, consequently alluding to illusory space through atmospheric representations of the landscape. This approach is compared to Joanna Lamb's flat, geometric suburban landscapes that are similarly based on real estate imagery. I consider how a comparable sense of unease is achieved through these two different approaches (Lamb's and mine) and emphasise my substantively different focus on sympathetic connections to place. This approach draws on the melancholic indication of feeling in Giorgio de Chirico's urban landscape paintings. The felt quality of painting highlights the influence of personal reflections on the notion of home when questioning

the perfect display home. I continue to experiment with the illusion of depth through the swimming pool motif, exploring the extent to which realism can be stretched to represent a slippage between real and impossible spaces. I discuss the use of hue, tone and perspective to represent a still, empty landscape, preludeing the possibility for cinematic feelings of space to be explored in relation to my work.

In Chapter 4: Staged Elements of the Display Home, I discuss a body of work in which the suburban landscape is visualised in a more cohesive way—tied together with a similar colour palette, intentional use of series, and the consideration of the size and shape of the canvas. My approach to scale and the representation of atmosphere is influenced by cinematic qualities that can create a shifting sense of stillness and movement. Focusing on closer viewpoints on the backyard and entranceways, more intimate aspects of the house are explored. By using these more intimate viewpoints, I discover ways to sympathise with feelings of attachment and experience through the use of thresholds and proximity. The indication of menace is used to relate to the impossible promise of perfection of the display home and is compared to methods employed in filmic narratives to suggest complex associations with the landscape. Focusing on films that heighten tension between perfection and illusion through the façade, windows and the swimming pool, I foreground the thresholds that can suggest lingering disquiet in the everyday suburban setting. This feeling is linked to Hammerstiel's exploration of escape and virtual landscapes. He employs ambiguity by suggesting an intersection of the visible and invisible in *Make Yourself at Home VI*, *Instant Vacations I* and *Waste Land 3*. The messiness and complexity of home that is suggested in his work influence the way I approach painting to provide felt associations with real and imagined experiences of place. The role of painting and its primacy to this project is discussed in relation to sensation and the way the atmospheric feeling of disquiet can be alluded to through the considered application of glazed and layered oil paint. Discoveries made about the representation of time, touch, and the emotive potential of absence lead to new considerations about the way I assemble motifs and treat the surface and shape of the paintings in the next series of work.

Finally, in Chapter 5: Reimagining Menace and Seduction, I build on feelings of ambiguity and seduction, exploring realism as a way to resolve painted allusions to the real and metaphoric complexity of home. I focus on ways these feelings can be explored through the representation of water and foliage. These gardenesque qualities and aqueous moments are used to allude to a complex visualisation of paradise in a way that moves beyond the aspiration of the display home, drawing on emotive and sympathetic

connections to place and home. I continue to explore a balance between varied expressive, realistic and abstracted marks to achieve a feeling of place that is in-between the real and imagined. The abstract expressionism of American painter Mark Rothko demonstrates the way multiplicity of shared emotion can be expressed through thresholds. Rothko's work is explored in relation to the unfolding feeling of seduction, which builds on the notion of comfort to engage with the more specific evocative potential of the garden and pool. The seductive qualities of water and its associations with leisure, fluidity and depth are capitalised on by representing the swimming pool in a more realistic manner. This approach is influenced by artist David Hockney's swimming pool paintings and his insights into the relationship between time and the act of painting, as well as his personal reflections on his decision-making process when constructing and picturing the landscape. This connection to Hockney's work helps to develop an awareness of other comparable contemporary approaches to the conceptual potential of the swimming pool for visual art and how it can be used as a pictorial device for reflecting on cultural identity.

My discoveries are significant in that they point to how the considered use of abstraction and realism in painting can be used to support multiple interpretations of place, home and suburbia. My paintings allude to felt and atmospheric associations with promise and reality, offering a way of opening up questions about the artificiality, seduction and false promise of the display home. Starting from reconstructions of the façade that reimagine the traceless image of the display home, my practice evolves to consider more intimate and ambiguous viewpoints that are combined with personal connections to place. Empty landscapes are used throughout this research. This reflects the interpretation of the perfect image as characterised by an overt emptiness, made to be looked at rather than lived in. Painting is used to embed traces back into the empty suburban landscape. The use of mark-making, layered surface, and deepened space counters the lack of depth in the superficial representation of home. The display home hides the complexity of home, reflecting a pervading sense of anxiety to keep up appearances by erasing evidence of messy habitation. Rather than illustrating these ideas as narratives by positioning objects or people into the scene, I reimagine the emptiness with the presence of painted traces, embracing the slippery, fluid, infinite possibility of mark-making. This opens up the possibility for multiple interpretations and associations with the empty suburban landscape, guided by the atmospheric feelings of menace and comfort. Through my practice-led research, I question the pervasive desire for traceless perfection to highlight the underlying messiness and complexity tied to the Australian suburban landscape.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Display Home, Suburbia and Place**

In this chapter I explore current theories concerning suburbia in Australia and the concepts of place and home associated with this landscape. The display home and its defining characteristics are explored in relation to the socio-cultural aspects of the Australian suburban landscape. I will examine notions of place that contribute to a sense of home and belonging, and the role experience has in developing such feelings of attachment. This notion of attachment is subsequently drawn on throughout the research and becomes a basis for examining how the display home is understood within the socio-cultural complexities of the suburban setting. Research that covers the fields of art, architecture, sociology and anthropology drawn on in this exegesis sits beside the conceptual and physical methods that drive my project.

The uniformity and homogeneity of display home designs have been examined by Dovey (1992; 1994; 1999) to illuminate the cultural and social significance of contemporary suburban planning models in Australia. These design models engage in the promotion of the display home as both a reflection and projection of desire and aspiration for the single-family detached home archetype. In order to scrutinise the desire and aspiration for the familiar archetypal home, I examine the ideas of non-place and the uncanny that are used to express feelings of alienation and de-familiarisation. I have a deep familiarity with Perth's established garden suburbs, which contrasts with new suburban landscapes where history and experience are yet to be developed. The polarities of familiarity and alienation, perfection and illusion, messiness and order, and menace and comfort that unfold in this project are positioned in this chapter as underlying complexities reacted to and reflected upon through my practice-led research.

## Suburbia in Australia

This project is focused on a particular type of Australian suburban landscape—new housing developments on the urban fringes. My observations on new suburban landscapes in Perth aim to develop understandings of the imagined space between promise and reality. The feelings of desire, aspiration and longing that emerge from the Australian suburban setting are reflected in the display home. Statistics collected by the Australian Housing Industry Association show that detached houses make up 72 per cent of new residential developments (Urbis 2015, 13). The off-the-plan designs are largely sold through promotional display homes via advertising that reflects prevailing trends in design, and other forms of media including reality television, news websites and dedicated new housing magazines. Notwithstanding their ubiquity, these designs are aimed at appealing to the aspirational buyer. This aspiration is driven by the ongoing development of Perth's suburbs and the dream of a single-family detached home as a cultural symbol of economic and social success in Australia (Dovey 1992). For the first part of my project, I have focused on the façade of the display home as this public display of home can be understood as a signifier of this longing and aspiration.

The display home often exists within a display village, and architectural elements tend to follow a stylistically homogenous pattern in most housing developments across Perth. This landscape simulates a real, lived suburban street in its built form. All of the signs of a neighbourhood exist in the landscaped streets, houses and roads, however it is a temporarily uninhabited space. This simulation of a suburban landscape principally follows the garden suburb ideal, which is developed from “utopian visions, reform ideologies and sociological theories” (Stickells 2004, 1). While imported ideas of modernist design and neo-traditional New Urbanism<sup>1</sup> have influenced the development of suburbia in Perth, these have been continuously filtered through the garden suburb ideal (Stickells 2004). The image of the traditional leafy suburb has remained an important marketing tool in continuing the proliferation of the single-family detached house archetype in Perth.

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<sup>1</sup> New Urbanism was developed in the 1990s as a response to the placeless sprawl of regions and cities. It is an ideology that calls for “the neighbourhood as the basic urban building block” with a “stress on higher density, mixed uses, and pedestrian and public transport accessibility” (Glendinning 2010, 49). The success of New Urbanism in reconnecting with a strong concept of place was nonetheless limited by its adherence to maintaining a traditional image of suburbia and a “refusal to engage with the deeper currents of globalization” (Glendinning 2010, 50).

Modernism and New Urbanism are examples of suburban reform applied to the Australian landscape from the 1950s, and both have ramifications on connections to place. Miles Glendinning argues that

we need to establish flexible frameworks of planned coordination within cities and regions that steer between the alienating planning megalomania of Old Modernism and the scenographic fundamentalism of New Urbanism, with the aim of embedding individual developments in a sense of place. (2010, 148)

Architecture and planning that is “oriented towards ephemeral display” has contributed to a decreased sense of place, belonging and identity (Glendinning 2010, 167). Stickells (2004, 405) similarly identifies a focus on image-making in Perth’s northern suburban development as a way of integrating New Urbanist ideas: “The importation of New Urbanism to City North was undertaken through a process that used its forms and imagery as a means of constructing promotional scenery as much as affective urban form.” The display home is an example of marketing that encourages a seductive image of community and harmony.

Given this intersection of modernist design, garden suburb ideals and New Urbanist models of planning in Perth, I suggest that the display home is an example of a utopian home in an age of cynicism. This notion is derived from Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s (1989) questioning of ideology and post-ideology. Žižek’s ideas are not positioned as central to the theoretical underpinnings of this project, however his notion of ideology resonates with the political ramifications of place in relation to the suburban landscape. The image of the ideal home is formed between reality and illusion. Žižek’s (1989, 25) main argument about ideology is that we are not yet living in a post-ideological age, but an age of cynicism, where “the cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideology mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask.” Potential buyers of the display home realise that they are entering into a fantasy and being actively seduced by the luxurious interiors, spacious living rooms and sparkling swimming pools. To use Tony Myer’s (2004, 63) summary, “they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it.” Tracing the influence of the traditional garden suburb and neo-traditional models such as New Urbanism, and considering the contemporary issues of seduction, alienation and cynicism, the display home presents a complex intersection of understandings of place in suburbia.

In exploring the overlapping ideals of the various planning forms and ideology that influence the shifts in the suburban landscape reflected by the contemporary display home, Australian architect Robin Boyd's ([1960] 2010) critique of the post-war suburban landscape in *The Australian Ugliness* is considered. Boyd was a key figure in the Australian modernism movement during the mid-twentieth century. Modernism, defined by British architect and theorist Neil Leach (1999b, 3) as "the aesthetic practice of modernity," intended to improve the state of architecture and society through observation and projection. Boyd observed that the Australian suburban landscape suffered from vast apathy towards planning and design in its growth after World War II. In particular, Boyd ([1960] 2010, 95) noted that "progress [in suburban development] is measured by the number of acres transformed from the native state of sloppiness to the desirable state of clipped artificiality." This view is also reflected in Australian writer George Johnston's novel *My Brother Jack* (1964) set in post-war Australia. Ian Hoskins (1994, 2) discusses Boyd's and Johnston's "similar associations between the shape of suburban space and the pursuit of respectability." This is alluded to in images highlighting a preoccupation with clipped perfection and conformity. The main character in Johnston's novel, David Meredith, moves into a new suburban development, which eventually becomes a source of disillusionment. When fixing the television aerial on the roof of his home, David observes the suburban development in a new light:

my elevation provided me with the first opportunity I had to look out over all of the Beverly Park Gardens Estate, and there was nothing all around me, as far as I could see, but a plain of dull red rooftops in their three forms of pitching and closer to hand the green squares and rectangles of lawns intersected by ribbons of asphalt and cement. (Johnston 1964, 266)

This project draws on the feelings that come from a range of observations and lived experience of suburbia to gain an understanding of the socio-cultural ramifications of housing developments and the promise afforded by their display villages. I draw on Boyd's ([1960] 2010) and Johnston's (1964) critique of the Australian suburban landscape, and the insights gained from their ideas about the social and cultural factors that influence the experience of suburbia and how it is shaped <sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge the political dimensions of suburbia in Australia and how they influence social and cultural identity, but an extensive examination of this is beyond the scope of this project. The most relevant political example in my experience of suburbia is conservative Prime Minister John Howard's tactic of appealing to the "aspirational," or the working class, who make up large populations and can win or lose elections (Hosking 2016).

A key socio-cultural aspect of suburban planning is related to the question of style. Boyd ([1960] 2010, 75) discusses the then emerging housing styles in Australia—“the Georgian” and “the self-consciously American Californian Bungalow...Orientalism...and the Japanese architectural-decorative style” as well as “the self-consciously nationalist Australian styles: either New-Old Colonial or Log-Cabin Bushmanist.” These geo-cultural styles were applied to the design of whole buildings. However the ramifications of these varied styles could be seen in the Featurist style of affordable housing:

The simplest escape from this confusion for the ordinary builder and designer was to reject all strong suggestions of style, to carry on with the economic-utilitarian conventions, but to add snippets from one or more, or all of the passing fashions, and to feature each snippet against an uncontroversial background. (Boyd [1960] 2010, 75)

Contemporary display homes continue this tradition of borrowing snippets of styles, according to Dovey (1999), who has categorised and analysed the naming of display homes that variously refer to British ancestry, Mediterranean names, regional names, and names that suggest power, progress, or gemstones<sup>3</sup>. Even though Boyd’s critique of the use of style and facades was formulated in the 1960s, there are clear parallels with contemporary concerns about the profit-driven motivations of new suburban developments, as outlined by Dovey (1999), Hall (2010) and Stickells (2004) who are key thinkers in this area. Although housing styles might be limited in the suburban landscape, they nonetheless reflect a culture that expects choice. The way different styles are marketed also offers a kind of imaginative projection that I am interested in examining in this project by correspondingly exploring a de-familiarised feeling of suburbia through painting. This projection provides a way of looking at the display home that highlights the contradiction between the immaculate façade and its abject emptiness.

Hall (2010) argues that contemporary housing developments reflect an emphasis placed on the exchange value of a home, which can restrict the variation of design and use of materials.

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<sup>3</sup> Dovey (1999) suggests that the ideas based on the naming of display homes were influenced by stereotypes associated with the names. British names might suggest “connotations of tradition, privilege and heritage,” while Mediterranean names “indicate a Eurocentric and heterotopic imagery—the ideal home is found in other places and other times” and regional names suggest histories and geographies, while names evoking power, progress, self-image or gemstones link “the quest for a timeless authenticity with drama, dreams, art and glamour” (Dovey 1999, 149).

Dovey (1992; 1994; 1999) interrogates the political, social and cultural shifts in attitudes towards habitation that can be seen in changing display home designs in Australia. The display home plays an important role in reflecting profit-driven attitudes, where “the design functions not only to satisfy desire, but to ensure an ongoing production of envy” (Dovey 1999, 148). The anonymity and uniformity of new house designs ensure that they hold resale value in their appeal to a wide range of consumers (Hall 2010). Furthermore, Stickells (2004) recognises the impassive development of Perth’s garden suburbs characterised by this uniform design. The display home is innocuous, but it is unfamiliar as an experience of home. The display home feels like a stage for action as it is fully furnished but devoid of any signs of being a lived-in environment. In my paintings, I initially attempt to capture this strangeness of order and emptiness that is unique to the manufactured nature of the display home. The display village street has all the familiar architectural attributes of suburbia, but without any of the experiential cues. These anonymous attributes are used in my paintings, but take on a more personal engagement by layering them with touch, imagination and thought.

In considering my personal reflections on the state of becoming<sup>4</sup> that the display village represents, I have drawn on my first impressions and documentation of new suburban developments. When visiting these developments, I imagined observing the houses from the perspective of a potential buyer. The newness of the houses was seductive and the adherence to the single-family detached house archetype made them familiar, however the designs are, for me, homogenous, and as an observer, I saw overt attempts to disguise the sameness. This awareness left me unable to enter into the fantasy<sup>5</sup>. I identify the design features used to distinguish between display homes, including blade walls, porticos, compartmentalised garden beds and water features. These features were recorded through thumbnail sketches and photographs, which led me to question how ubiquitous design, stemming from garden suburb ideology, can reinforce and reproduce elements of socio-cultural Australian suburban identity.

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of becoming, or the state of something moving towards another is understood through my reading of Leach (2006, 85), who says becoming “is a matter not of representation, but of affect.” Leach offers a definition that draws on multiple interpretations of this paradoxical idea of pure becoming, of being between two states that is described by Deleuze ([1981], 2005, 25) as a “zone of indiscernibility.” This specific interpretation ties the word back to my focus on the relationship between feeling, sympathy and place.

<sup>5</sup> This, for me, relates again to Zizek’s (1989) ideas about the age of cynicism and masked ideology. His ideas are influenced by German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s book *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), in which he argues that the term *kynicism* is different from *cynicism*. Zizek (1989, 26) summarises Sloterdijk’s definition of *kynicism* as “the popular, plebeian rejection of the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm.” My position on subverting the seduction of the display home by making a painting, which becomes another type of commodified cultural object, reveals an underlying act of *kynicism*.

As part of this exploration of display home design, I initially borrowed from found imagery in real estate brochures and paraphernalia circulated by housing construction companies for marketing purposes. Visits to display villages and photographic documentation have also served as source material. The photographs that were taken relate back to the feeling of passing through the display village. The viewpoint focuses on the street outside the house, looking at the façade. This perspective helps to develop a tension in my work between the familiar and the strange. More specifically, I have aimed to reflect the ubiquity and uniformity of design, and the ambivalent feeling of longing evoked by this setting due to its artificial perfection. The homogeneity of the façade is reimaged through an approach to painting that aims to engage with the felt experience of place.

### **The ideal home**

For this research, the notion of the ideal home is rooted in garden suburb ideology, where the suburbs were intended to provide a space between the city and nature. According to Australian heritage consultant Rosemary Rosario (1997, 42), the garden suburb model in Perth shaped “two satellite towns separated by a belt of undeveloped land” with the first two display homes built in the 1930s to help stimulate the building industry after the Great Depression. Variations of this ideology have ostensibly shaped the design of the Australian suburban landscape (Hall 2010; Speed 2008; Stickells 2004; Garnaut 2000). The design of the garden suburb is aimed at encouraging a balance between privacy and connection, with an emphasis on creating “a hierarchy of public spaces for active and passive recreation and architectural unity but not uniformity” (Garnaut 2000, 80). Connections to place and belonging are linked to the architecture of suburbia, including green belts and the size of the house relative to the backyard. My experience being raised in a ‘model’ garden suburb in Perth has shaped my response to new residential developments, causing me to question the reasons behind the continuation of a neo-traditional ideal.

Contemporary suburban developments continue to encourage the garden suburb ideal, as identified by Stickells (2004). However, socio-cultural and political shifts reflect a different kind of ideal home architecture. To explore this shift, I draw on Hall’s discussion of backyards as a reflection of changing Australian lifestyle values. Hall claims that

the front yard...acts as an ornamental skin to the dwelling and presents a face to the community. The front can be seen as the public/private interface: expressing power and individualism but at the same time conveying a desire for community and public respectability. (2010, 37)

I am interested in the façade of the display home as it reflects an ordering of private open space that is decorative and homogenous in its uniform characteristics of lawn, garden beds and porticos.

Mass housing and suburban sprawl in Western society have led to homogeneous, “cookie-cutter” homes that lie on the urban fringe (Newcomer 2009, 18). The focus has shifted from the nature/city intersection to the image of the individual house façade. Alain de Botton’s (2004, 3) notion of “status anxiety” posits that in the Western world we are constantly anxious about failing to measure up to others’ expectations of success. This status anxiety is directed at appearance and can be related to the house façade especially in terms of how it connotes a particular social class and income. According to Hall (2010, 39), “middle-income yards have seen far more emphasis on planning for display, with domestic functions being far more concealed.” The swimming pool, outdoor entertainment areas and façades that I draw on as motifs in this project reflect a shift from utilitarian uses of outdoor space, such as clothes drying, vegetable gardens, workshops and garages in the mid-twentieth century, towards the display of recreation and leisure (Hall 2010; Dovey 1994). This shift is also reflected in the changing image of the house in advertising, which in turn encourages feelings of aspiration, desire and longing.

These feelings of aspiration, desire and longing in relation to the ideal home are explored through the representation of the swimming pool. According to Hall’s (2010) statistically informed research, backyards in Australian suburbs are shrinking due to lifestyle changes. Listed as a key feature in real estate advertisement, and perceived as a luxurious way to utilise shrinking outdoor space, the swimming pool can be linked closely to feelings of nostalgia and memory as well as desire and aspiration. Australian writer Steve Bedwell (1992, 137) refers to the Australian yard as “the focal point for suburban life in summer.” The suburban summer has come to be associated with the luxury image of the swimming pool, which is in turn representative of leisure and recreational time. The swimming pool is useful to consider when analysing the notion of the ideal home and its complex definitions within the Australian suburban setting. The swimming pool presents the idyllic display home as a recreational retreat, while

simultaneously alluding to the metaphoric duality of comfort and menace as outlined in this research project.

### **Place, home and familiarity**

In looking more closely at my personal experiences of suburbia in this project, I explore theories of place in relation to current understandings of home. In this exegesis, definitions of place are positioned in relation to the complex feelings of belonging and alienation in suburban Australia. According to Caroline Speed (2008, 33), “the concept of ‘place’ is highly contested across a number of academic disciplines, including geography, philosophy, architecture, and ecology.” Speed’s (2008) PhD thesis examines theories of place in relation to the Australian house and its links to the community and environment. These ideas have developed my understanding about the connection between place, location and landscape.

The fixed location of the home is significant in developing an attachment to place. The notion place and attachment is understood in relation to Speed (2008) and her interpretation of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s theories. Speed highlights a key issue in Tuan’s work, namely, the role of perception, emotion and thought in defining our experiences of place. As Tuan (1979, 6) explains, “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value...each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.” I aim to create a link between the act of painting and the feeling of place.

Tuan (1979, 10) suggests that “[feeling and thought] lie near the two ends of an experiential continuum, and both are ways of knowing.” I hope to engage with ways painting can evoke feeling and provoke thought through reflective practice. This project explores the cultural symbols of the swimming pool and streetscape in relation to Perth’s garden suburbs and my experience of home. While the display home is clean, neat and well kept, my experience of a lived home includes weeds growing in the garden, pictures on the fridge, and dishes in the sink as emblematic of lived-in traces.

French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1990) claims that for a space or object to become familiar, it must allow meaning to be gained from it in an immediately recognisable way. This recognition is derived from memories and experience, but also from

descriptions, photographs, videos and the media. We recognise places by recalling how it is presented in the world (Bourdieu 1990). The display home occupies an in-between space that has the familiar structure of a home as well as the qualities of a commercial space. The display home can be visited, but also can be seen in advertisements and brochures. It simulates the familiarity of home by fabricating lived experience. This fabricated feeling can be contrasted to the felt characteristics of place, which may be compared to cultural anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's notion of atmospheric attunements;

nameable clarities like family or friendship or love or laughing or telling stories or violence or place are all atmospherics. All forms of attending to what's happening, sensing out, accreting attachments and detachments, differences and indifferences, losses and proliferating possibilities. (2011, 4)

The myriad ways meaning is made from the places we inhabit highlight how complex the idea of home can be, and how the absence of accumulated experience can result in the feeling of quietly menacing atmospherics.

In this research, the concept of the ideal display home is used as a comparison to my experience of the everyday to develop insights into the varied atmospherics of suburbia. For the majority of Australians, the experience of the everyday is tied to the suburbs (Hill 2015; Hall 2010). The suburban landscape is a familiar setting for experiences that shape social and cultural values in Australia. As Hall (2010, 46) explains, "the everyday refers to those elements of human experience that are ordinary but that convey many complicated meanings." For me, home is a place of nurture and care, but comes with the complexities of feelings inherent to forming relationships, growing up and negotiating stability. For Hall (2010), the feeling of stability that comes from the familiarity of home can counter the unpredictable nature of experiences in the outside world. The rituals of experiencing home, including the sanctuary of the yard and garden, familiar routes walked through the neighbourhood, and feelings attached to the image and feeling of home, form a sense of belonging and connection to place that encompasses all of these spaces.

The extent to which stability, security and connection are tied to the understanding of home is dependent on an individual's experience, as the home can just as commonly be a place of instability, trauma and anxiety as it can love, nurture and security (Sibley 1995; Cresswell

2004; Cieraad 2006). The connection I have to home includes memories of the unspoken resentments between divorced parents, continuing fluctuations in fights and friendships with siblings, and carving out personal space throughout various shared living arrangements. These formative experiences provide a counterpoint to the positivity and promise of the display home, which helps me to develop a personal framework for seeing and feeling through painting to allude to particular atmospherics of place.

The familiarity of home as a place of security and connection takes time to develop. New houses provide a different image of suburbia, where streets of display homes are finished and landscaped, while the surrounding plots of land are in varied states of construction. Hall (2010) points out the use of fences and hedges in suburban spaces as protective boundaries. In new housing developments, the delineation of space by fences and roads creates a sense of distance and privacy, exaggerated by the lack of habitation in the display village. If the home is understood as connection and familiarity, the display home is comparatively alien and strange.

The display home's in-between state reflects a manufactured sense of homeliness, which can be compared to the experience of a hotel, where things are maintained anonymously in readiness for the next guest. Leach (2006) uses the example of a hotel room as an anonymous place that can foster a sense of familiarity. In a hotel, guests can engage with the space in a 'lived' manner once you are in the room. They can unpack their bag, take a shower, brush their teeth, and turn lights off and on. However, in the display home the interaction with the space is restricted. A visitor might stroke the marble bench top, or open a cupboard to check its storage capacity. Taking away the things that we live with in a home leads to a sense of alienation that for me is so subtle and elusive that it is unsettling, and is the starting point for my research into reimagining this simulated suburban setting.

The display home is familiar to Western understandings of the structural qualities of the house, but the lack of evidence of habitation can lead to a sense of alienation. Leach (2006, 4) claims that "environments which were once unfamiliar become appropriated within our symbolic horizons, so that with time they come to appear deeply familiar." This idea of familiarity resonates with Tuan's (1979) notion of space becoming place with experience, memory and time, and also with Bourdieu's (1990) notion of familiarity. The development of social significance creates familiarity, but we also rely on repeated interactions with a space to form an attachment to it as a place (Tuan 1979; Leach 2006). Because a visitor only experiences a limited exposure to the display home, it remains an unfamiliar temporary

space. This restricted exposure to the display home can be contemplated and slowed down through the time-consuming and reflective act of painting.

The feeling of simultaneous strangeness and familiarity in relation to architectural space is theorised by American architect and theorist Anthony Vidler (1992). He builds on the architectural application of the term *uncanny* and his insights resonate with my reflections on the feeling of the display home. Vidler's (1992) theory of the architectural uncanny draws on Sigmund Freud's (1919) essay "Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)." Freud (1919, 244) describes the uncanny<sup>6</sup> as an effect that is "produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced." While there are other things and feelings that the uncanny can describe<sup>7</sup>, this description of the term is most relevant to my project. Although I am not seeking to project an image of the display home that is uncanny, the display home reflects elements of the uncanny in its un-lived state.

Feelings of place can border between care and disquiet, and the notion of the uncanny helps to define this border. French romantic writer Victor Hugo's description of an abandoned but otherwise neat-looking house reveals a disquieting sense of place: "The site is magnificent, and consequently sinister" (Hugo, quoted in Vidler 1992, 20). Evidence of lived-in traces implies feelings of care. Like the neat-looking house, the alluring newness of the display home can be impressive on first inspection, however the invisible accumulation of missing traces can paradoxically contribute to a sense of menacing emptiness. The idea of traces is explored in relation to the very familiar and everyday idea of messiness, which refers specifically to the collision of relationships, objects and memories that mark a home as lived. These aspects include the complex entanglement of love, isolation, lingering resentments, enclosure and attachment formed in the social sphere of home. The mess is yet to be made in the display home where everything is thoughtfully and immaculately placed. I use the concept of the uncanny as a way to understand the feeling of something not being quite right in the un-lived display home. Using this comparison, I draw attention to the value of home as a place of connection, experience and feeling.

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<sup>6</sup> The uncanny is a term derived from the German word *unheimlich* and its ambiguous translation has led to its use for describing an ambiguous type of feeling (Freud [1919] 1955). "Heimlich" translates from German to English as homely or canny and familiar, so "unheimlich" is understood to mean familiar yet strange (Freud [1919] 1955, 220).

<sup>7</sup> The notion of the double, or the haunted house, of "whatever reminds us of this inner compulsion to repeat" can be perceived as uncanny (Freud [1919] 1955, 238).

Building on the complexity of accumulated experience in the home, I consider the connections between the display home and the notion of the domestic non-place. Contemporary anthropologist Marc Augé (1995, 77-78) defines non-place by opposing it to place, “if place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space that cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity is a non-place.” Non-place is linked to temporary locations of transit, commerce or leisure, which rely on “solitary contractuality” (Augé 1995, 94). Similarly, Thomas Gieryn (2000, 463) claims that the urban fabric of the Western world now varies less and less and that “as places lose their distinctiveness, place loses its reality and significance.” Gieryn’s (2000) theory of place is directed towards power, the politics of control and the symbolic meaning of place. For this research, the notion of non-place is understood as reflective of detachment, which is different to the type of knowing that comes through tuning into the communal qualities and connectedness of place.

The display home can transition from a non-place to a place of homeliness for its eventual inhabitants. I agree with Speed’s (2008, 29) definition of house and home: “The house is a physical structure, and it becomes a home for a person when they experience it as meaningful, develop affective ties with it, and view it as a field of care.” The idea of home is tied to feeling and thought, and as such it relies on experience to define it. However, as the commercial space of the display home is only activated during certain times of the week when potential buyers interact with it, it operates as a temporary non-place. In Tim Gregory’s (2009) PhD dissertation he argues that the new suburban home, even in its lived state, functions as a non-place. He uses the examples of supermarkets, the office, the home, the internet and the school as non-places that function for consumption in the Western world. According to Gregory (2009), the irrationality enacted in a non-place impedes prediction and empathy. To counter the consumerist aspects and lack of empathy and solitude in the display home, I look to painting as a way of exploring metaphors for the desire and seduction mixed with memory and experience driving the impossible aspiration for an ideal home. By pointing to the transitory, seductive and menacing qualities of the new suburban landscape, I aim to provoke thought about contemporary understandings and definitions of the ideal home.

This research examines the complexity of place by relating lived experience of suburbia to observations on the un-lived display home. On one hand, a home is a place where we can experience a pause, and create a sense of connection and belonging. However, the way in which home is considered in the media and real estate aligns it with places of temporality

and immediacy. The display home represents domestic non-place as a transitional space between an architectural representation of the structure of a house and the lived experience of a home. I focus on representations of the display home in this project and draw from the tension contained in contested notions of place in suburbia.

In this chapter, I have identified the Australian context for the social and cultural concerns surrounding the suburban landscape, as well as wider considerations of Western notions of place, non-place and the uncanny. The suburban landscape in Perth provides the basis for my understanding of garden suburb ideology, housing development planning and the ongoing desire for traditional low-rise, low-density, single-family housing types that evoke aspiration. These interconnected ideas support my consideration of how the duality of promise and reality can be alluded to through painting. This duality is discussed in relation to my reflective painting process in the following chapter, focusing on the use of tonality, surface and scale to sympathise with atmospheric experiences of place in the suburban landscape.

## Chapter 2

### Visualising Conflicted Feelings of Alienation and Familiarity

This chapter focuses on my first series of paintings in this creative research project that engage with allusions to conflicting alien and familiar feelings tied to suburbia. I have used painting as an act of embedding time through a consideration of touch, composition and imagined representations of atmosphere. The two-dimensional rectangular shape of the canvas forms a relationship with the aspirational image of the façade seen on billboards and for sale signs in the display village. In this way, I focus on the façade to reflect a duality of promise and reality tied to the image of home. The indication of feeling through painting is explored using a reflective methodological framework and focusing on how familiar things can be perceived as strange.

Following on from the theoretical understandings established in Chapter 1: The Display Home, Suburbia and Place, I explore the notions of sympathy and mimesis in order to engage the nuanced paradoxical relationship between connection and detachment. The ideal tracelessness of the display home is compared to the utopian promise of modernism through the consideration of impossibility and the imagined space of painting. German artist Gerhard Richter's clinical figurative representation of the seascape is contrasted with my technique of creating surfaces that range from messy and textured, to flat and pared back. I undertook a process involving the variation of tone, brushmarks and paint application to create conceptual and atmospheric associations with the duality of familiarity and alienation in the suburban landscape.

### Painting and sympathy

In this painting project, I draw on Spuybroek's (2011, 148) notion of sympathy in relation to design: "sympathy is what things feel when they shape each other." Spuybroek is influenced by nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin's romantic notion of sympathy to position modern understandings of aesthetics in considering the role of variation, imperfection and fragility. This consideration relies on the surface relationships of ornament, defined by the following dualities: organic and crystalline, lively and still, and abstract and figurative. Spuybroek's argues for a return to sympathy through feeling and thought:

Sympathy is as much a feeling as a form of thinking, but one that is especially present in aesthetics, meaning it specifically acknowledges a mental, but not physiological, and a bodily, though not sensual, reciprocity between us and things. It concerns both the resonance of two things and the synchronization of two activities, but it is certainly not a relationship of taste. (2011, 146)

This conceptual relationship between feeling and sympathy has provided an understanding of the felt experience in both making and responding to the process of painting. The notion of sympathy informs my reflective approach to developing complexity through painting.

My paintings discussed in this chapter, *Marienbad* (2015) (Figure 3) and *Xanadu* (2015) (Figure 6), aim to create a feeling of immersion through the illusion of depth. Experimenting with abstracted and figurative techniques, I reflect on the way texture and surface have been used to engage with sympathy, paying attention to the shaping of motifs using thin paint that soaks into the canvas, and thicker paint that lies on top. Common to both paintings is the treatment of the surface, varying the application of paint between the house, pool, foliage and sky with the use of layering and erasure. The notion of sympathy is used here to allude to the feeling of exchange through the act of painting, imparting thought and imagination through touch. I focus on this exchange during the process of making as well as in the time spent reflecting on and re-evaluating the outcomes. The reflection process is a strategy for making decisions about the subtleties of mark-making and the way paint is added and subtracted to build a surface.

The use of erasure is a way of representing the un-lived house as an anonymous space or a void. Surface variation was integrated to capture spaces that are separated not by lines,

but by the interaction of surfaces. Spuybroek (2011, 83) references Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843) when describing the importance of the surface where "only gradations and variations exist, that is, gradations not only of hue and brightness but of dimensions themselves" and where "only the in-between of line and surface truly exists." When studying surface, I recognise that the negative and positive spaces form planes of space, some made by carefully blending the paint, and others from dragging a brush or a squeegee over a larger area of the surface. These works intentionally exaggerate the variation of marks to create contrasting surfaces that range between messy and textured to still and flat.

The rendered and clipped textures of display home advertisements give an impression of flatness and uniformity. On analysing these images, it was evident that the variation that exists in the rough surface of the rendered concrete, the unruly growth of grass and plants, and the shifting patterns of weather had been edited out. Spuybroek's (2009) argument for sympathy draws on the works of John Ruskin, Wilhelm Worringer, Theodore Lipps and Alfred Gell, and posits that variations, textures and shifts are what animate a surface. The ability of line to act in combination with surface can describe force and motion, "among the most beautiful of [lines] are described by bodies variously in motion, or subjected to force: as by projectiles in the air, by the particles of water in a gentle current" (Ruskin 1851, quoted in Spuybroek 2009, 39). In *Marienbad* and *Xanadu*, I represent force and motion by amplifying and reducing painterly marks. While my palette combines realistic and imagined hues, and the water and sky move between realism and abstraction, the massing of surface engages with the multiplicity of textures, variations and residue of suburban landscapes. By revealing these elements, I explore a felt approach to variation and changing surface qualities through painting. As opposed to the perfect, traceless image, the exaggerated variation of the surface in my paintings sympathises with lived experience.

In my initial paintings for this project I have intended to embed imagination and thought into representations of display homes in terms of how they exist as un-lived places. The lack of figures and exaggerated vastness of space used in *Marienbad* and *Xanadu* create an ominous atmosphere that resonates with this un-lived state. These two paintings explore ways I can create tension between familiarity and strangeness, outlined earlier in the theoretical definitions of place, suburbia and home. In both paintings, my focus is on the layering of paint and variation of colour to suggest an imagined representation of texture and atmosphere in the landscape.

### Order and complexity

As well as Spuybroek's proposed return to sympathy, the notion of mimesis and alienation in urban space has helped me to navigate the tension between the familiar and strange. I refer to Leach's definition of mimesis, derived from Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf's (1995) *Mimesis*, as

a precondition of fellow feeling, compassion, sympathy, and love toward other people. It is imitation, assimilation, surrender; it leads one to copy in experience the feelings of others, without objectifying or becoming hardened towards them. (Leach 2006, 37)

This summary describes the ideas of imitation and fellow feeling, and while there are myriad theoretical understandings of mimesis, Leach provides the most relevant definition for this exegesis. Gebauer and Wulf (1995) describe the painter's role in representing the world around us as providing a space to mediate between image and representation. To engage with these images in a mimetic way, the painter can impart "invisible sensations" through their work (Gebauer and Wulf 1995, 150). For example, when painting water I use colour and undulations of tone to represent a fluid substance. The mimesis is operating not just at a level of representing an image of water, but also alluding to a feeling of it. The colour, movement and shapes within the pools in my paintings are not photorealistic copies of a pool, but instead are representations that aim to encourage associations with multiple experiences of water; of immersion, desire, longing and calm. These associations became more affective as my painting technique improved over the course of this research. The paintings point to the invisible sensations of our relationship to the experiences of home and place, which can be reflected through metaphoric connections to the pool and landscape.

In *Marienbad* I have reimagined the sense of vacancy in the display village and the distanced viewpoint that is derived from documentation of the street. The uninhabited image of the new home can be an image of aspiration and promise, of a "dream world" (Dovey 1999, 139). However, vacancy can also have unsettling associations with abandoned places. This contradiction contributes to a sense of menace. Considering this, I have manipulated the composition common to real estate advertisements to suggest a slippage between promise and illusion.



Figure 3. Fiona Harman, *Marienbad*, 2015, oil on canvas, 100 x 130 cm.

The title alludes to the spa town Marienbad in the Czech Republic made famous in the late nineteenth century as a luxury holiday destination for European celebrities and royalty. Drawing on the sense of longing and luxury that is associated with the title '*Marienbad*,' I parody the way housing developments in Perth inspire longing, with some housing construction companies coining the paradoxical term *affordable luxury* in their marketing. These housing developments begin by clearing the existing landscape. The streets are designed to form private cul-de-sacs to ensure no unnecessary through traffic, and landscaped parks and gardens are built. My observations of the display village Shorehaven (Figure 2) guided my representation of landscape in *Marienbad*. Shorehaven, in its state of semi-completion, was characterised by emptiness. I felt this in relation to the cloudless sky and the construction sites piled with sand and bricks on the verges. The village had newly planted saplings on the median strips and freshly planted ornamental gardens outside the display homes. Based on these observations, I attempt to develop a sympathetic response to the suburban landscape

in a semi-constructed state. A feeling of unease is relayed between the promise of a finished, flourishing community promoted in the advertisement banners of Shorehaven, and the reality of the in-between, empty housing development.

In exploring the feeling of an in-between state, geometric shapes are used to delineate the architectural space, creating the possibility of seeing the new landscape as a 'blank slate,'<sup>8</sup> artificially removed from the original landscape. My representation of landscape in *Marienbad* moves between the depth of the water, to the plane of ground, to the sky, in a way that feels detached and suspended in space. Using techniques of layering and collaged arrangement, the feeling of absence behind the seemingly ideal image of the suburban landscape is foregrounded. This feeling echoes the elusive sense of distance and alienation felt in the new suburban landscape.

In *Marienbad*, I highlight the complexity of surfaces by simplifying shapes and using varied paint application. The simplified shapes reflect predominant design forms, and the painted surface varies to form thick and thin layers using both rough and smooth brushmarks. For example, the void surrounding the façade creates a gradient from yellow to blue, reminiscent of the glaring sunlight of Perth summers. The composition is split into four planes, with thresholds connecting and separating the spaces. The top plane is made up of a gradient of sky, which merges into the ground. This becomes the pavement that leads back towards the house façade. The smooth gradient of sky is interrupted by a single brushmark that acts as a glitch on the surface, and the decorative blade walls connect the horizontal with the vertical structure of the house. The ground moves into the pool through steps that lead down into the water. I have used smooth brushmarks for the pool and more evident brushmarks for the façade to add to the feeling of fluid and dry space respectively. The steps suggest an entry point into the wetness of the water, which contrasts with the dryness of the pavement and concrete rendered house. These choices of mark-making, including the glitch in the gradient of the sky, act as gestural guides that allude to the eventual undoing of perfection when uninhabited, traceless suburban space becomes an inhabited place. This transition from emptiness to occupancy encourages associations with the complexity of lived experience.

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<sup>8</sup> John Locke (1841) argued that humans are born with no innate impressions or ideas, and that our understanding of the world is shaped by experience and perception; we are a 'blank slate'. The 'blank slate' of a new housing development is guided by the plans, allotments and building types that are pre-approved, for example, in the design guidelines found on the Shorehaven website (Shorehaven 2016). These guidelines are determined by the government and commercial institutions, and followed by home developers, builders, engineers and planners, with special rules outlined for garages, building materials, front façade designs, setbacks and more (Shorehaven 2016).

Furthermore, I have employed the technique of glazing, using thin layers of tinted blue pigment over the base colour field of desaturated yellow to unify the composition. This connection between the four planes creates a gradual emergence and dissolution of space between the background and foreground. The viewer is encouraged to feel as if they are at once wading towards the house and permanently separated from it by the more solid paved space. In my representation of the aqua blue space of the pool, unseen organic forms cast reflections on the water. An undisturbed swimming pool would ordinarily reflect a clear blue sky. In contrast, I purposefully create different and unexpected reflections on the water. These illusive reflections conjure feelings of ambiguity that are associated with the lived experience of home. The representation of aqueous moments creates sympathy with the movement and gesture of paint and abstracts the boundaries and the reflections of the pool. I extend on this relationship in my next painting, using representational patterns that could evoke a stronger connection between the constant motion of water, the fluidity of paint, and the slippery nature of place. In *Marienbad* I began to bring attention to the subtle disorder of domesticity that is missing from the perfect image of the display home by introducing painterly allusions to a disjointed representation of place.

### **Modernism and impossibility: Callum Morton's *International Style***

Composition, hue and surface quality are chosen to reflect the duality of promise and reality in *Marienbad*. The house is positioned at a distance and separated by water to suggest an unreachable façade. The ideal lingers in the oasis of the aqua blue swimming pool, but the indistinct shapes in the reflections suggest an ultimate undoing of this ideal. This undoing parallels the modernist utopian ideas of aspiration, desire and impossibility. Modernism in architecture intends to improve the state of the built environment and society through observation and projection (Leach 1996b). Observation is a way of understanding society, while the projection of an ideal—or, according to British academic Ruth Levitas (1990, 8), “a desire for a better way of being”—is where utopian vision enters into the aims of modernism. Any utopian vision comes with it an inherent impossibility (Levitas 1990).

Australian artist Callum Morton has explored the impossibility of modernist architectural ideals in his installation titled *International Style* (1999) (Figure 5). This artwork is a scale model of Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (Figure 4). Morton's work uses the visual replication along with audio playing sounds of a dramatic cocktail party; laughter, clinking glasses and music are abruptly interrupted by gunshots and screams

(Callum Morton *Babylonia* 2005). The idealism of iconic architecture erases the realities of the everyday which form attachments to place. As Morton puts it:

that party scene is about this idea we have of suburbs being where all the bad stuff happens, so I am putting the bad generic sort of suburban stuff inside an individuated iconic form. In a sense, the building is corrupted by everyday life. (Morton, quoted in Backhouse 2003, para. 17)

The Farnsworth House embodies a history of tension between promise and reality, which is reinterpreted in *International Style*. While adhering to aspirational and progressive ideas of modernist architectural design, van der Rohe's design was considered as a flawed private residence by the client<sup>9</sup>. The story behind the Farnsworth House, and Morton's representation of it, resonates with the utopian dream of the display home in the sense that the traceless perfection which is on show is interrupted once it is inhabited.

Morton's *International Style* subverts the utopian propensity that exists within modernist architecture. While the use of sound creates a tangible unease through the disruptive and menacing associations, the dramatic lighting used in his representation of suburban architecture is equally disquieting. I have only experienced this installation through photographic documentation, which brings attention to the dramatic lighting used in the gallery and the geometric shape of the model. In this way, I am influenced by the atmospheric qualities of the work and the conceptual approach to reimagining the traces of habitation through the use of sound and light to artificially animate the empty model house. This combination of a static model and suggestive light and sound reflects menacing undertones attached to the complex realities of home.

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<sup>9</sup> According to British architectural theorist and academic Simon Unwin (2010), van der Rohe intended the Farnsworth House to be at one with nature; its glass walls provided uninterrupted views and functioned to integrate the home seamlessly within its semi-rural landscape. While this intention was based on uncompromising modernist theory, the reality was that the house offered limited privacy for the client Dr. Farnsworth who detailed her dissatisfaction, including the way the house would overheat in summer, and in winter the glass walls would drip with condensation (Unwin 2010). The house lit up like a beacon at night, the fire in the hearth would cause the house to fill with smoke and ash, and the flat roof leaked when it rained (Unwin 2010). For van der Rohe, the Farnsworth House was designed to express "an architectural language of openness, freedom of movement, light and visual contact with the surroundings" (Unwin 2010, 66). It followed the International Style, adhering to ideas of simplicity, honest structure, technological advancement, human scale and volume (Unwin 2010).

Morton brings together the idealism of modernist architecture and the everyday experiences of habitation. He points to the complexity of the suburban home, which is filled with personal attachments meeting with the embedded elements of ideology and utopian visions that



Figure 4. Mies van der Rohe's *Farnsworth House*, photograph.



Figure 5. Callum Morton, *International Style*, 1999, acrylic, automotive paint, vinyl, lights, sound, 240 x 80 x 50cm (installation).

influence design. This complexity resonates with Unwin's notion of the "Platonic House," which is derived from Plato's theory of ideas:

The Platonic house is yearned and desired for, and dreamt up from our different experiences of the home...Our Platonic houses are the evolved ideals, perhaps originating from extremely early experiences in our lives and developing through life. (2010, 73)

Impressions of home are built up over time. Bachelard (1964) shares this view, believing that attachment and belonging are innately connected to habitation. The tangible, dreamt and imagined experience of the home contribute to a phenomenological connection to place (Bachelard 1964). The home holds a particularly evocative part of our experience of place—as Bachelard (1964, 6) writes, "memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of daydreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets." Bachelard invites the idea that we can create atmospheric associations with moments that are linked to a poetic memory of place rather than a fixed one. The subversion explored in Morton's work brings attention to the potential for architecture to develop attachments, both positive and negative.

The artificial and dramatic exaggeration of lived experience of the everyday represented in Morton's work makes explicit the aspirational promises of modernist architecture. By comparison, my work attempts to capture both the artificial sense of lived experience in the display home and the evocative realities that can potentially exist through habitation. I reflect on my use of both artificial and representational colour, an exaggerated feeling of space, and an imagined representation of atmosphere in my work. The intersection of promise and reality is considered through the artwork of Morton, and the theories of Unwin and Bachelard. These ideas have influenced the way I make explicit the implicit false promise of the display home in a way that can provoke further questions about the extent to which architectural influences can affect the subsequent habitation of a home.

### **Undoing the ideal**

In *Marienbad* the use of layered texture and unfixed sky and ground enacts the image of a dream world slipping away. This idea is exaggerated in the representation of the suburban landscape in *Xanadu* (Figure 6), which pictures a suburban street partially submerged by



Figure 6. Fiona Harman, *Xanadu*, 2015, oil on canvas, 100 x 130 cm.

a body of water. The title alludes to imaginary representations of utopia and dystopia, specifically in relation to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (1816) poem "Kubla Khan," which describes the ancient palace of Xanadu<sup>10</sup>. The dark, atmospheric sky and rough water are abstracted, expressive and full of movement, while the display home façade is static in my work. The act of layering and wiping back paint to create a textured surface is heightened and exaggerated to encourage associative responses to the de-familiarised representation of landscape. This treatment of the surface and dynamic representation of atmosphere builds on the feeling of absence in *Marienbad* to explore a more overtly ominous and menacing feeling of place. This latter feeling subverts the representation of the ideal display home façade, which typically reflects desire and aspiration.

Storms are menacing in the way that they invite remembered experiences of uncertainty, foreboding and insecurity. The unpredictability of weather is removed from the perfect display home to create the image of a consistent and reliable structure. Painting is by nature fluid, malleable and organic. In *Xanadu* my technique of layering paint in fluid glazes makes use of this malleability. The representation of atmosphere and water suggests movement, variation and energy while the house is painted in a way that conveys the solidity and structure of a still, quiet refuge.

I took cues for my representation of atmosphere from Richter's *Seascape (Grey, Cloudy)* (1969) (Figure 9). In composing *Xanadu*, I combined photographs and multiple studies of a house located in the Shorehaven display village to translate the street into a more uncontained watery space (see Figures 7 and 8). Richter's *Seascape (Grey, Cloudy)* combines a different sky and ocean taken at separate locations with slightly different lighting and atmospheric conditions (Elger and Obrist 2009). Richter's photorealistic painting subtly records this incongruity. Richter describes his landscape as "untruthful," identifying the difference between the way nature is glorified in landscape painting and the darker realities that are often overlooked;

nature, which in all its forms is always against us, because it knows no meaning, no pity, no sympathy, because it knows nothing and it's absolutely mindless: the total antithesis of ourselves, absolutely inhuman. (Richter, quoted in Elger and Obrist 2009, 158)

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<sup>10</sup> The poem "Kubla Khan" generates imagery and ideas in an open and associative way about the contradictory nature of paradise, existing between utopia and war (Nayar 2013). John L. Lowes (1930) writes that the poem originated from an opium-induced dream, influenced by merged stories from books and imaginary ideas. The creative freedom of Coleridge's poem and the idea of paradise and its shortcomings resonate with my technical approach and conceptual influences.

The lack of sympathy he detects in nature is reimagined in his work to engage with romantic notions of lost paradise and beauty (Elger and Obrist 2009). The atmosphere and lack of figures in Richter's work allude to the beauty of an untouched natural landscape. The controlled way he uses paint reflects this paradox of untouched beauty and unsympathetic weather.



Figure 7. (Left) Photograph from Shorehaven Display Village, 2014.



Figure 8. (Right) Fiona Harman, *Facade (sketch)*, 2014, oil on board, 24 x 38 cm.



Figure 9. Gerhard Richter, *Seascape (Grey, Cloudy)*, 1969, oil on canvas, 140 x 140 cm.

For me, Richter's approach to painting provides insight into my comparatively different method of utilising glazing techniques that aim to create evocative depth and abstracted details which can metaphorically allude to the messiness and uncontrollable experiences of place and home. The colour palette is less realistic in *Xanadu* compared to *Seascape (Grey, Cloudy)*, heightening the saturation of the blue hues and exaggerating the tonal contrast. I have also used a more abstracted and gestural application of paint in comparison to Richter's photorealistic approach.

The surface in *Xanadu* is built up from light blue-grey to black-blue, which provides evidence of time spent layering the paint. Dripping paint becomes a new watery pattern to explore in more considered detail and the squeegee marks reveal the underpainting to create a thick line between the new and old layers of paint. The tonal shifts I have used draw attention to the lightest parts of the water, while dark tonal areas create an illusion of depth. While Richter identifies the mindlessness of nature, I focus on the sympathetic responses that connect me to landscape through the act of painting. The motifs of the house, pool and garden respond to the impact nature has on the atmospherics of the everyday. The materiality of paint and the push and pull between labour and chance respond to the messy and unknowable feelings of place.

Depth is also embedded through layering a semi-transparent image of a swimming pool on top of the bitumen road to visualise a flooded streetscape. While there is no direct intention to engage with environmental issues, the water resonates with disaster images of flooding and storms. The house amidst an expanse of water resonates with the idea of sanctuary and refuge through this imagined scene. While Richter records a static landscape captured by photorealism in *Seascape (Grey, Cloudy)*, my painting *Xanadu* represents a more unrealistic landscape that suggests movement, variation and changefulness through surface. In both cases, the representation of landscape combines observation and imagination to create incongruent spaces. Richter identifies the untruthfulness of landscape painting in concealing the grim realities of nature, while I suggest the impossibility of perfection conveyed by the image of the display home.

Spuybroek quotes Alfred Gell (2009, 36) to describe the way ornamentation or decorated surfaces create "perceptual involvement and fascination" with an artwork. Spuybroek writes that,

There are several properties to a decorated surface: one is that it is constructed by a motif: a figure that twists in a particular way, and multiplicity, a manyness

created by translations, rotations and reflections of many such figures, nested into larger patterns. So the figures are figures of movement, and their configurations are also the result of precisely choreographed movements. (2009, 36)

In both *Marienbad* and *Xanadu*, the painterly qualities aim to create different representations of this ‘manyness’ via reflections and figures within figures. The multiplicity and ornamented surface can also reflect the tension between the clean, crisp image of the perfect façade, and the reality of what Lyn Churchill (2015, 122) describes as “the residue, the fatigue and the mess that gets lost in the image of domestic perfection.” The varied surfaces and reimagined atmospheres in my paintings allude to the traces of lived domestic space. However, the contrast between the manicured façade and the unsettled water and sky could be exaggerated further to make this allusion more apparent. By reimagining the Arcadian, hygienic, polite image of the suburban landscape in *Xanadu*, I have begun to engage with more nuanced experiences of the home—opening up a new way of critically engaging with the contemporary suburban landscape, and reflecting on imaginative personal connections to place.

The variation and gradation in *Xanadu*—and to a lesser extent in *Marienbad*—orchestrates the activity of viewing and possibly becoming immersed in this imagined suburban landscape. This unfolding event might resonate with Leach’s mimesis and Spuybroek’s sympathy. For Spuybroek (2011, 87), sympathy is linked to ornamentation, mimicking the natural formation of “matter, massing and texture.” I have found through these comparisons and theories that ornamentation in landscape painting is achieved in the representation of place, enacted through the surface qualities of the painting. My paintings highlight a connection to place and belonging within the unrealistic space of the un-lived new suburban landscape. This has been explored through an attempt to heighten the dissonance between stillness and movement. By using the un-lived, empty display home setting as the basis for landscape painting, I concentrate on the potential residue and messiness of place that can make it remarkable. The anonymity and static perfection of the display home is met with the painterly suggestion of movement in my attention to surface variation. In *Marienbad* and *Xanadu* the surface qualities are varied by adding and subtracting paint, and creating shifting planes to explore the duality of promise and reality.

Leach (2006) explains that we are able to project ourselves into images, particularly paintings, by identifying with recognisable elements within the image. In *Marienbad* and

*Xanadu* techniques are used to encourage engagement through imagined projection into the suburban landscape. At this stage of my project, I have established a useful feedback loop between discoveries made in the process of painting and my reflection of nuance and complexity tied to place and belonging. Contextualised against the continued yearning for the traditional garden suburb in Perth, I acknowledge the disparity between my experience of belonging, shaped by experience and feelings tied to place, and the intangible promise of the display home. The parallels between the utopian underpinnings of modernism and the aspiration of the display home image resonate with the impossible imagined spaces in my paintings.

Through my exploration of alienation and familiarity, I have considered new strategies for testing, reflecting and refining the techniques that can develop my painting process. I have played with representations of atmosphere and water with the fluid layering of paint, and experimentation with varied mark-making, tonal and hue combinations. The suburban motifs and my use of titles allude to imagined experiences and create metaphorical associations with place. I have begun to explore water as a suggestive representation of complexity and feeling, which will be explored more decisively in the next series of work. The decisions being made in this practice-led research are measured against the development of a feeling of contention between promise and reality, which for me is tied to the notion of the display home. This contention is contingent on my understandings of place and home, informed by wider socio-cultural understandings of the new Australian suburban landscape. This feeling of dissonance between menace and comfort will be further explored through the considered exploration of atmosphere and realism, using the techniques developed in my paintings that are attentive to mark-making and representation.

## Chapter 3

### Promise, Illusion and the Display Home

Building on the representation of unrealistic atmospheres in my paintings in Chapter 2: Visualising Conflicted Feelings of Alienation and Familiarity, the next series of work explores ways painting can mediate the contested space of the real and the ideal. In this chapter, I examine the relationship between the lived and the unlived in representations of the Australian suburban landscape as a way to explore feelings of menace and comfort. These feelings are derived from ideas of promise and illusion, which are alluded to through the continued use of the swimming pool and display home motifs. The home and its myriad connections to place, identity, consumerism, architecture and landscape have been explored by contemporary and historical artists. To contextualise this practice-led research within the field of suburban landscape painting, I establish a connection to artists Robert F. Hammerstiel and Joanna Lamb, particularly in terms of notions of parody, anonymity and perfection. I will also discuss Michel Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias to position the paradoxical ways painting can suggest real and imagined experiences of place. The conceptual underpinnings and personal narratives of place are explored through atmosphere, hue and tone to elicit more explicitly the feelings of menace and comfort. To build on Spuybroek's notion of sympathy, I introduce Gilles Deleuze's ([1981] 2005) theory of sensation in painting to further situate the relationship between seeing and feeling in painting, which is discussed in relation to the combination of controlled and gestural mark-making.

In my representation of atmosphere and architectural space, I consider Giorgio de Chirico's urban landscape paintings and his portrayal of a melancholic feeling. De Chirico's work has been an ongoing influence for my exploration of the atmospheric potential of architectural

space in painting. Identifying the influences and similarities between our approaches to painting, I use this comparison to understand the role of gesture and attentive representation in engaging with feeling. New Zealand academic Jacky Bowring's (2008) research into the feeling of melancholy and place attachment informs my reflection on de Chirico's work. From this consideration, atmosphere and emptiness are used as metaphoric indicators of feeling that can animate representations of the landscape. To picture this indication of feeling, I use more realism when painting atmospheric skies and architectural motifs, focusing on doorways, stairs, the pool and windows as recognisable motifs that contrast with the abstracted space within which they are assembled. By employing decisive variations in hue, and nuanced and sensitive representations of surfaces, I create an illusion of depth that ties the contrasting spaces together. The technical focus of my work reflects the conceptual concerns with de-familiarising the ideal image of home, using motifs as metaphoric indicators of the yearning and longing attached to the impossibility of perfection.

### **Heterotopias and perfection**

Artist Robert F. Hammerstiel's work provides an integral understanding of the duality of promise and reality in the suburban setting for this project. His photographic and film series *Private Stories I* (2005-2006) (Figure 10) explores the feelings of perfection, stillness and lingering tension in response to Blaue Lagune, an estate of prefabricated model houses in Vienna, Austria. Blaue Lagune offers fully furnished, empty show homes for potential buyers to inspect. Hammerstiel positioned actors around the houses in the estate, presenting them in moments of vulnerability or empty gesture. Austrian academic August Ruhs (2008, para. 3) suggests that *Private Stories I* reveals the superficiality of the immaculate presentation of the display homes and that the photographs reinforce this superficiality—"this world is overshadowed by the inevitable by-products of a consumer apparatus aimed at producing needs and satisfying needs: the invitation of longing, the denial of unfulfilled desire and the end of the pursuit of utopia." In considering Ruhs' interpretation of *Private Stories I*, Hammerstiel's photographs of display homes provide insight into the unsettling futility of longing and desire.

Hammerstiel questions the display village through photography, exposing the manufactured sense of homeliness that is found there. To explore the notion of longing and desire further in painting, I use the image of the display home for its non-lived, generalised representation



Figure 10. Robert F. Hammerstiel, *Private Stories I*, 2005-2006, C-print on aluminium, cartridge frame, acrylic lenses, 125 x 157 cm.

of place that is free from occupancy and personal narrative. It can be a place that reflects accepted social values, desires, aspirations and longings due to its anonymity and homogeneity. The use of realism in my painting connects visualisations of the display home with an imagined, atmospheric sense of place.

Social values are reflected in representations of the suburban streetscape, but they can also be interpreted through images of home interiors. Vanessa Galvin (2015) explores the tension between the lived and the un-lived image by investigating representations of interior spaces. The way home is perfectly presented in magazines and advertising reflects the social values of order, cleanliness and hygiene, understood as markers for morality in contemporary Western society (Trummer 2014). Galvin discusses the strange paradox of the appeal for immaculate interiors that lack authentic signs of occupation or experience. Similar to Hammerstiel's staged human occupants in the Blaue Lagune housing estate, Galvin (2015, 122) reports on her discovery of "a perfectly un-made bed in an otherwise

impeccably presented room” in a luxury design bedroom catalogue. This incongruent image is described by Galvin as follows,

The contrivance of the un-made bed deludes us into thinking an ideological shift has been embraced, when in reality all this gesture essentially provides is an allusion to the real that is still unreal—and which functions as nothing more than a reinforcement of the ideal. (2015, 122)

While Galvin focuses on the strangeness of the interior, her observations about the image of the ideal can be extrapolated to critique the perfectly manicured garden and house façade of the display home. Hammerstiel’s *Private Stories I* series similarly parodies the way staged gestures or scenes can serve to reinforce the unreality of an image. The staged public display of a perfectly kempt private space can evoke an unsettling feeling of the domestic setting.

Hammerstiel achieves a sense of unease in the way he captures the perfection and superficiality of the display home through photography. In considering the role of photography as a method for engaging with the cleanliness of the modern home, Austrian art historian Thomas Trummer (2014, para. 5) says, “there, indeed, is a link between photography and the idea of purity. Photography is, to a certain extent, the methodological equivalent of the clean. It too has a smooth shiny surface.” The methodological relevance of photography to Hammerstiel’s work and Galvin’s magazine example reinforces the yearning for the home to be traceless. The process of oil painting involves strong odours and requires mess to be made. While a painted surface can be made to look smooth and clean, the realities of the process cannot be hidden, and my approach involves layers, drips and imperfections. Considering Hammerstiel’s approach and what it reveals about a similar subject matter helps me to position the way I think about the overlap between what is revealed and hidden in representations of the house and the way we consume images of perfection.

I explore the potential for painting to suggest darker tensions and atmospheric sensibilities that exist in suburbia. To allude to this type of tension and sensibility, I draw on Foucault’s (1986) notion of heterotopias as a way of describing place as paradoxical. The first principle of heterotopias describes crisis spaces, which are privileged or forbidden and where behaviours are alternative to the norm. These crisis spaces have evolved in the contemporary context into deviant spaces. Heterotopias can function differently depending on the situation and can represent multiple realities, such as the cinema and traditional ideas of the garden. Heterotopias can represent a break from usual expectations of time, and they can create



Figure 11. Fiona Harman, *The Alhambra*, 2015, oil on canvas, 110 x 140 cm.

a system of opening and closing that makes them only partially accessible. I interpret the display home as being linked to both this compartmentalised and transitory idea of time, as it has opening hours when the real estate agent opens up the house for potential buyers to visit, and in its final transition from an un-lived display to a lived-in home once it has been moved into. Finally, heterotopias function “between two extreme poles” (Foucault 1986, 27), lending them to feelings of incongruity and mysteriousness. Vidler (2014, para. 4) explains that Foucault’s notion of heterotopia is influential to the “[institutional] establishment of order and exercise of power” through built space. In other words, heterotopias can influence and shape the socio-political and cultural values of a place, and are dependent on the delineation or fragmentation of exterior, interior or landscape architecture.

The most relevant of these heterotopic principles to this painting project is that they can represent an illusory space (Foucault 1986). There is a feeling of illusory space in my painting *The Alhambra* (2015) (Figure 11). The viewer is invited to project and compare their own experiences of home with the ideal of an unoccupied, traceless display home. According to Foucault (1986, 27), heterotopia’s “role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.” This other space masks the actual conditions of the real world (Galvin 2015). The display home compares to this other real space as an ideal, which forms a foil to the real experience of home. This ideal creates a sense of longing and desire as it reflects a strive for perfection. In contrast to the ideal, I consider the sympathetic aspects of messiness and complexity that define place and the feeling of belonging to home. I attempt to mediate this contested, in-between space of the real and the ideal as a setting to quietly confront the active consumption of the idealistic public display of the house façade.

In *The Alhambra*<sup>11</sup>, paint is used to explore the slippery, transitory feelings of time and place, comparing this approach to the fixedness of Hammerstiel’s photographic recording of unoccupied suburban spaces. The display home simulates an erased personalisation of a private space; it encompasses our desire to live in an idyllic, traceless manner (Galvin 2015). The distant feeling of longing is alluded to in the composition, positioning the viewer apart from the house. The water becomes the buffer between the entry and exit, and provides a

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<sup>11</sup> *The Alhambra* is palace located in Andalusia, Spain, characterised by geometric patterns of Islamic architecture, fountains and reflection pools. I considered these stylistic characteristics when reflecting my use of geometric architecture and organic water in *The Alhambra*. By using this title, I allude to the heterotopic image of the display home—as belonging to another place and time.

space that alludes to motion, depth and immersion without being a photorealistic recording of water. This imagined space challenges the permanent and immutable characteristics of photography to explore the evocative potential of glazing and layering abstracted marks to describe water. I use the process of painting and its ability to create illusive spaces to question the ideal and embrace the slippery paradoxes of heterotopia. The reality of messiness and complexity of home is hinted at through the unrealistic and heightened use of colour and atmosphere.

The use of heightened atmosphere, tone and colour of the landscape in *The Alhambra* suggests a transformation from ideal to menacing through the indication of muted light and the illusion of depth. The golden yellow glaze over the house, grass and sky transforms the space to suggest a heterotopic place that conveys a duality of comfort and menace. The clouds and elongated shadows create an ominous atmosphere associated with stormy nights. Built up with brown, yellow ochre and umber, the clouds create a shifting opacity and translucency, allowing for the golden yellow glaze to unite the top half of the composition. The ominous feeling of storm clouds suggests movement, varied light and weather. I use this atmosphere to allude to the shared attachments to place shaped by remembered experiences of home from a distanced perspective of the façade. The separated planes of the seemingly bottomless vertical water and the illusion of horizontal depth moving towards the façade and into the sky elicit this feeling of distance. When collecting photographs of display homes, I would often wait for a cloudy day to capture the foreign sense of heavy atmosphere that creates this illusion of depth. Moulding this representation of atmosphere and colour through painting sets up an imagined image of the display home which suggests fragmented and varied experiences of place that exist alongside the perfect façade.

The different planes in *The Alhambra* shift between opaque and translucent applications of paint. The façade of the house employs conventions of realism in the depiction of windows, stairs and shadows. The grass has been depicted as a more fluid substance to mimic the watery space of the swimming pool, creating the feeling of a physical and conceptual void. The path separating the grass from the pool is more solid, belonging to the realism of the house façade. I emphasise the ability for imagined spaces with recognisable forms to alternate between being read as plausible and impossible. Painting allows for incremental shifts in the level of detail to control the representation of weather and light that contributes to the feeling of atmosphere. The imagined atmospheric place in *The Alhambra* encourages the viewer to project their own experiences of the

suburban setting, taking cues from the stormy sky and the undefined depth of the water. Building on the previous series of paintings, my approach to weather and the landscape has more thoughtfully embraced the relationship between the movement and fluidity of paint and the complexity and malleability of atmospheric feelings.

### **Painting the façade**

The illusion of depth is explored further in my next series of paintings, and my approach is compared to that of Australian artist Joanna Lamb's colour-saturated, geometric suburban landscapes. Lamb uses similar compositions to my work, and a comparison of our approaches demonstrates the development of unease through varied representations of the Australian landscape. By referring to Lamb's painting *Exterior: 15 Colours no. 2* (2013) (Figure 12) and my painting *Eden* (2014) (Figure 13), I demonstrate the menacing feeling in my work, and why it is relevant in creating new understandings of representations of architecture in contemporary landscape painting.

Lamb's *Exterior: 15 Colours no. 2* uses a restricted palette of 15 highly saturated colours stencilled to form a representation of a house and a backyard swimming pool with acrylic paint. Lamb's approach to representation is described by Australian art critic Robert Cook (2007; original italics) as "forms and colours that appear realistic, yet are really the well-worn *signs* of realism." For me, Lamb's simplification of the structural forms of the suburban setting into blocks of modulated variations of value makes the space more distancing and alien as the textures and atmospheric qualities are removed. Brochures and real estate advertisements have contributed to the way I represent the display home. Lamb similarly used real estate imagery as a reference point for *Exterior: 15 Colours no. 2*. As Australian art writer Gillian Serisier (2013, para. 3) explains, "parodying the symmetrical perfection of a real estate brochure's styled and slightly eerie perfection, Lamb strips the image bare of nuance, filler and grit." The strict adherence to form and design reflects a vacuous home in Lamb's work, enhanced by the fixedness of fast-drying, flat acrylic paint. The decision-making in what Lamb has chosen to simplify, and what details to keep, presents the possibility for tuning into the subtlety of form left without texture. However, I believe simplification in painting can be used effectively to draw attention to the surfaces that make up an empty landscape, bringing heightened awareness to the traces and subtleties of depth and detail that influence the complex and nuanced feelings of a place.



Figure 12. Joanna Lamb, *Exterior: 15 Colours no. 2*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 115 x 155 cm.



Figure 13. Fiona Harman, *Eden*, 2014, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm.

Lamb is also from Perth, so the images of suburbia that influence our practice are comparable, however, I consider the process of implying texture and creating layers through oil paint as alternate ways of tracing place. There are variations and factors of chance employed in my use of oil paint that align with the unpredictable feeling of weather and life that occupies the home. While Lamb creates a feeling of detachment and unease through simplification and the use of flat acrylic paint, my use of the slow-drying, malleable and retraceable qualities of oil paint attempt to create sympathy with the disorderliness of home by implying texture, atmosphere and depth.

In *Eden* the use of varied painted surface qualities, the atmospheric sky, and movement in the swimming pool suggests a menacing feeling in the absence of figures and vastness of space. In comparing *Eden* and Lamb's *Exterior: 15 Colour no. 2*, I can better understand how my use of visual language positions the idea of complexity and messiness within the seemingly perfect domestic setting. In *Eden* I reimagine the once familiar scene of the streetscape, expanding the pool beyond its expected size and filling the sky with grey clouds. I am attentive to the shifts colour from shades of yellow, blue, grey and green by varying the application through pouring, blending and layering paint. This approach aims to change the expected form of both the geometric architecture and organic representation of water. I want this shift in visual language to express an invitation for the viewer to project nuanced narratives and memories onto the painting.

Comparing my oil painting methods to Lamb's flat use of space, made with acrylic paint, helps me to understand the role of the illusion of depth and the evocative feeling of atmosphere. The sense of vertical depth that can be achieved specifically from the varied application of oil paint has informed my next series of paintings. By encouraging a longer engagement with surface and time, the visceral and slippery quality of paint and touch can be used to heighten allusions to the unknown. By harnessing this unpredictability and materiality of oil paint, I have achieved the evocation of a more poignant feeling of menace and comfort in the landscape. These discoveries advocate for reflective practice as a way of understanding the dormant complexity of decision-making in painting, and the ability for materiality and mark-making to contribute to the creation of an atmospheric feeling in the work. I combine intuitive approaches with methods that are decisive and intentional.

### **Landscape and melancholy**

For me, emptiness in suburbia is associated with abandoned sites and states of transience between occupancy and habitation. The empty display home image is used to encourage

a sense of seductive potential for the buyer. Caught between the state of display and habitation, the suburban setting is explored as an eerie, transient space in my paintings and I embrace painterly qualities that allude to this ambiguity. By introducing the concept of melancholy and a discussion of de Chirico's urban landscape paintings, this section further emphasises the way visceral handling of paint, as opposed to the clinical approach of Lamb or Hammerstiel, can create sympathy with the atmospheric of place.

The idyllic image of new suburban developments is underpinned with the historical Arcadian notion of the picturesque. Bowring (2008, 95) describes the Arcadian landscape as "a place of untrammelled happiness and peaceful existence...of scenes of nature gently modified by culture, and of the associations of such settings with the ideals of Utopia." This idyllic landscape was reimagined in the mid-twentieth century by artists and writers who were responding to social and political changes in Western society. Artists in particular were responding to the upheavals of modernity, namely, the two World Wars and industrial development, which caused a widespread sense of dislocation and alienation (Bowring 2008).

Surrealist and Metaphysical landscape painting responded to the dislocation and alienation of modernity, with artists drawn to representing the familiar made strange by combining incongruous figures in dream-like settings (Bowring 2008). De Chirico's surreal landscapes influence the use of viewpoint, colour and tonal variation in my paintings. His painting *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* (1913) (Figure 14) is typical of what is referred to as his Metaphysical Period of paintings, which lasted between 1909 and 1919. American academic Ara Merjian (2014, ix) describes the cityscapes painted by de Chirico during this Metaphysical Period as "unsettling and anonymous." Merjian claims that the representation of architectural space in de Chirico's paintings is the most vital part in producing feelings of melancholy and unsettling anonymity, which respond to the socio-cultural issues of modernity that were contemporary to de Chirico's experience of place.

De Chirico represents architectural landscapes in a way that responds to feelings of melancholia and alienation. This felt aspect of his work influences the menacing undercurrent in my paintings, responding to notions of detachment and non-place. Bowring (2008, 79) describes melancholy as a "mode of relating to experience and place." It is a pensive sensibility, which can be triggered through a memory, connection and feeling. Melancholy can be felt in "darkness, unrequited longing,...twilight, autumn and minor chords...[things] evoking poignancy and the passing of time" (Bowring 2008, 13). Like menace, melancholy is

an atmosphere that is difficult to define, but can be understood through signs, sounds and images that connect us to a feeling of place.

The Italian piazza depicted in de Chirico's *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* is seemingly a smooth representation of a three-dimensional space, but his use of paint is much livelier on closer inspection. The suspended pigment is textured, built up in layers and applied with evident brushstrokes. The gradient of sky that shifts from deep green-blue, to green, to yellow is not a perfectly smooth transition. The ground is rough and the buildings have a coarseness to them as well. In addition to the painterly qualities, the composition of familiar figures and the strange representation of light are used to convey atmosphere and feeling. Merjian describes the work through dualities—between “generous and restrictive, practical and unfeasible, transparent and self-referential” (2014, 8)—and these resonate with my understanding of how architectural landscapes in painting can allude to multiple feelings of place. The allusion to feeling is amplified through the use of textured paint that exposes the landscape as a painted surface, and as such, an imagined representation of place. I explore the anonymous new suburban landscape to conjure feelings of menace and comfort; the architectural everyday is represented as an impossible landscape through the process of painting that, like de Chirico's work, retains the realism of familiar motifs.

For me, de Chirico's paintings create a feeling of suspended reality within architectural space. The evidence of brushstrokes and suspended pigment that is allowed by oil painting makes de Chirico's work less predictable than Lamb's use of flat acrylic paint or Hammerstiel's fixed photographic surface. This approach opens up possibilities for creating a dream-like feeling of landscape. Art critic and writer Paolo Baldacci (1997, 7) suggests that de Chirico's paintings “distance the imagination from current reality.” This distancing effect that de Chirico creates is felt through the evidence of his hand in making the work. The recognisable motifs are distorted and combined with historical and imagined motifs, allowing for the possibility of more unpredictable associations with place to be made. I am influenced by this particularly melancholic feeling of place in de Chirico's representation of architecture, figures and atmosphere.

Using the architectural motifs common to Perth-based display home styles, the simultaneous feelings of longing, yearning, emptiness and alienation in my paintings are used to reflect complex sensibilities towards place and belonging in suburbia. These feelings are synonymous with memories and experiences of home, both artificial and real. By



Figure 14. (Left) Giorgio de Chirico, *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* (La melancholi d'une belle journee), 1913, oil on canvas, 89 x 104.5 cm.

Figure 15. (Right) Giorgio de Chirico, *The Delights of the Poet*, 1912, oil on canvas, 69.5 x 86.3 cm.



Figure 16. Fiona Harman, *Villa*, 2015, oil on canvas, 55 x 81 cm.

exploring these dualities, the work creates an undercurrent of irony directed towards the way the display home is advertised, as well as a sense of sincerity in the way I consider felt connections of place and belonging. These clashing perspectives can be compared to the way de Chirico reconfigures the built environment that he was familiar with through the process of painting to reflect an imagined reinterpretation of both personal and wider socio-cultural reflections on the landscape.

In addition to the representation of architectural space, water can also be used to suggest melancholy in its allusions to nostalgia, time and distance. De Chirico's *The Delights of the Poet* (1912) (Figure 15) illustrates how tone and colour can reflect a particular feeling of time and atmosphere. The gradation from green-black to yellow-green, although foreign, alludes to the dying daylight and cooling atmosphere of the afternoon. Writers Peter Toohey and Kathleen Toohey (2004, 289-290) interpret the use of water as melancholic, "The water of the sea is perhaps what is behind the presence of the fountain in de Chirico's melancholy prewar paintings. The sea is infinite, like linear time. Water becomes associated with the etiology of melancholy and alienation." Water can represent the melancholy of an infinite divide, or the desire of an idyllic escape. Combined with the sun lounges and alfresco setting in my painting *Villa* (2015) (Figure 16), the swimming pool is both a signifier of desire, status and escape, as well as an allusion to a still, unknown depth of space. The anonymous domestic setting, with the inclusion of furniture, brings attention to the surfaces of things, resonating with the irony of the immaculate, un-lived image of the home as the ideal.

In *Villa* I focus on creating still atmospheric conditions in the sky, and a glowing swimming pool. These two spaces to appear disjointed to create a sense of unease that underlies the seductive glowing, glazed blue water. By simplifying the space, the empty setting provokes a heightened sense of stillness and anticipation, drawing attention to the complexity of interaction between each surface. I continue to test the amount of information necessary to invite the viewer to imaginatively project interpretations onto the landscape. In this attempt, the ambiguous space and the depiction of water and glass in the painting encourages projection into a less specific, more anonymous space.

*Villa* demonstrates stillness and passage in a way that suggests absence and underlying menace. The empty poolside furniture and the lack of human figures contribute to a sense of unease. Through the staged composition, the feeling of absence can become the subject

of the scene. British art critic John Berger posits that stillness is connected to the material quality of paint:

paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is. Even a reproduction hung on a wall is not comparable in this respect for in the original the silence and stillness permeates the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures. (1972, 24)

I similarly want the viewer to grasp a sense of scale from the chairs and architecture in *Villa* and project their imaginations into the space while sensing the traces of gesture and considering the composed nature of painting. I aim for the viewer to be able to feel the strange heavy grey-blue sky over them. I quietly provoke them to wade into the luminous, dark-edged swimming pool. Painting these details and manipulating scale informs how the illusion of space is experienced as an imagined landscape, hinting at the feeling of the atmosphere, the texture of the chairs, the variation of tone in the rendered wall, the look of the tinted and reflective glass windows, and the shadows in the pool.

The swimming pool is used in *Eden*, *Villa* and *The Alhambra* as a space that creates a point of projection into the painting. These aqueous moments reflect feelings of weather and time through the representation of stillness and movement in the water. By encapsulating these felt connections to the landscape, I point to the illusion of perfection in the display home. The recognisable architectural elements beyond this void of watery space tune into the subtleties of texture, surface and composition. I bring attention to the feeling of potential menace in an uninhabited scene; the unoccupied pool chairs; steps leading up from the water; the perspectival architecture representing doorways and windows. The viewer can imagine wading through the water to get to something more solid beyond it. By representing the house from this point of view, the impossibility of the scene is understood through thresholds that depict the planes of structure and perspective. These planes create a sense of disappearing, sinking or floating that effaces the impossible promise of the façade.

The paintings discussed in this chapter have explored the suburban landscape façade as a way of reimagining the desire for status and aspiration within the Australian suburban landscape. Using a surreal suggestion of depth through perspective devices, and mark-making that implies heightened atmospheric conditions, I have aimed to more acutely express the possibilities of engaging with a combination of real, remembered and imaged experiences of

suburbia. I create a feeling of longing and impossibility by isolating the architectural motifs and the swimming pool, and embedding the atmosphere with menacing qualities of storm clouds and dimmed light. Robert Hammerstiel's photographs of a manufactured suburban setting in his series *Private Stories I* and Joanna Lamb's equally perfect and flat, painted suburban landscape in *Exterior: 15 Colour no. 2* contextualise my interest in the impossible utopian aspiration for a suburban ideal. Comparing my use of oil paint with the flat acrylic paint of Lamb and the photographic stillness of Hammerstiel reveals the conceptual importance of mark-making and implied texture. This approach to painting alludes to traces and residue that exist behind the perfect façade. I have created a sense of disquiet through the representation of depth and atmosphere in oil painting.

De Chirico's empty urban landscape paintings have influenced the way I represent the surface of depth and perspective. The indication of a melancholic feeling in de Chirico's work is linked to the historical socio-cultural conditions that influenced architecture in the wake of modernism. Drawing on the notion of melancholy derived from the research of Bowring (2008), I have explored a sombre, menacing feeling of the landscape through the use of close tonal ranges to suggest a filtered light in my paintings. The representation of place in painting can not only suggest a feeling, but also open up different ways of interpreting a still image. The relationship between the viewer and maker will be unpacked further through the next series of paintings as a way of understanding the multiple associations that can resonate with place. The studio-led research that has evolved from this series of paintings and the comparisons to other artists has opened up new lines of enquiry about the role of abstraction and figuration. The representation of emptiness and animated surfaces leads me to consider the influence of films that resonate with the feeling of layered time and menacing atmospherics. I also explore allusions to sensation in painting, the use of series and interconnected scenes, and the role of ambiguity and thresholds for opening up interpretive responses to the work that continue to challenge a defined, didactic narrative about home and place.

## Chapter 4

### Staged Elements of the Display Home

This next series of paintings expands on the stage-like elements that were introduced in Chapter 3: Promise, Illusion and the Display Home to explore the duality of promise and reality. My studio-based research explores notions of shared feeling and attachment to suburbia. The work was considered as a series of interconnected settings, exhibited together as part of a solo show titled *Paradise Point* (2015) in Perth, Western Australia. I used a more unified colour palette and experimented with viewpoints to create this interconnected relationship.

Over the course of this research, viewers have been prompted by their responses to my paintings to tell me about specific narratives from films, books or their own experience. These anecdotal allusions are drawn on to create further developments and understand underlying ideas that would have otherwise remained hidden. Practice-led research has been used to uncover ideas that arise from these subsequent discussions that happen around my practice. The atmospheric qualities of my paintings produced over this period of time draw on filmic narratives that suggest ambiguity and multiplicity, drawing connections specifically to Frank Perry's *The Swimmer* (1968), Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999) and François Ozon's *Swimming Pool* (2003). I am interested in the potential for comparing menacing undertones behind the perfect façade of suburbia felt through the unfolding narrative of a film and the suggestive, seemingly fixed space of figurative landscape painting. The comparison reveals the evocative similarities in atmosphere, viewpoint and tonality that are shared across a range of creative approaches to representing disquieting feelings of place in suburbia.

The combination of gestural abstraction and figuration in my paintings is developed through the continued use of the swimming pool motif and now subtler references to display home architecture. In my theoretical research, I return again to Hammerstiel and his representations of suburban banality that draw from online virtual worlds. His reflection on promise and illusion informs my understanding of place being contingent on both positive and negative personal experiences. The complexities of experience are explored in my work through the reinterpretation of display home imagery, engaging ideas of intimacy and observation. To consider theoretical understandings of variation and the radical picturesque, I focus on the representation of atmosphere and the sensitivities of touch in painting. These techniques are thought through via my allusion to the slippages and unpredictable qualities of the everyday.

### **Filmic narratives of menace in suburbia**

In order to demonstrate how feelings of disquiet and unease can be translated through the suburban setting, I have considered the portrayal of home in English director Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999), French director François Ozon's *Swimming Pool* (2003) and American director Frank Perry's *The Swimmer* (1968). The contested notions of place in my project draw on ways the suburban landscape is represented across a range of cultural platforms, including visual art, literature, film and television, as a setting for darker narratives. The unfolding conflicts and suburban stories in these particular films set up exciting parallels for me to contemplate through painting.

I draw specifically on film narratives in this section to illustrate ways in which the home is experienced as a conflicted and paradoxical place. Perry's *The Swimmer* and Ozon's *Swimming Pool* use the setting of the home and seemingly idyllic swimming pool to frame a sense of observation that conceals and reveals secrets and desires. In Mendes' *American Beauty* the dark realities behind perfect façades are revealed through thresholds of windows and doorways, with a similar emphasis on the role of voyeuristic observation. By considering the unfolding narratives of these films, the comparisons encourage the possibility for a slower engagement with my paintings. The process of slowing down heightens awareness to the relationship between surfaces and edge qualities, and exposes the sense of time embedded in the act of making, thinking and imagining through painting. These fictional examples of suburbia influence

my painting process and allude to the disturbances and tensions that exist in collective and individual experiences of home without pointing to specific narratives.

The feeling of perfection unfolding into disaster is explored in Perry's *The Swimmer*, which follows "a man going to pieces on the outer reaches of suburbia" (Canby 1968, para. 2). Reflecting upon his profound love of swimming pools, Neddy Merrill decides to adventure home via swimming the length of his neighbours' pools. Initially the neighbours adore Neddy's presence but as the adventure unfolds and he gets closer to home, the adoration turns to hostility. The film alludes to domestic problems of mismanaged money and affairs, culminating in Neddy arriving cold and distressed at his abandoned home. The building tension within the ideal, leafy, bright suburban landscape, as well as the elliptical and hallucinatory feel of the film (Canby 1968), synchronises with the feeling of conflated perfection and illusion that I suggest in my paintings.

A similar tension between perfection and desire is confronted in Mendes' *American Beauty*, where the use of viewpoint and narrative resonates with a removed state of observation that I align with in my paintings. Academic David Smith (2002, para. 1) suggests that the tension in this film, set in suburban America, is based upon the characters' quest for freedom within "a closed, culturally pre-determined system." In other words, the notion of an endless pursuit of fulfilment of desire, set up by a habitus<sup>12</sup> or the social formation determined by relations of production<sup>13</sup> of the society we live in, is satirically depicted as futile. The film follows the story of two families, the Fittses and the Burnhams, who live next door to each another in an affluent American suburb. Smith (2002, para. 4) summarises: "[they] inhabit two distinctive complexes of cultural values and personality types—two architectural and sociological boxes." I am particularly interested in how these houses are depicted as

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<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu (1990) describes habitus as the domestic, economic and social structures that shape our perception of the world, and our individual experience of sensibilities, our dispositions and preferences. The desire and longing that the display home encourages responds to the consumer's collective aspiration for home ownership, which represents security, belonging and success.

<sup>13</sup> French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's (1971) notion of ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses can provide further understandings of the underlying psychological desire inherent in the display home and its aspirational façade. Althusser (1971) claimed that established social practices influence our desires, choices, preferences and formation of identity. These are shaped by exposure to family, the media, political systems, trade unions, the legal system, education and religious institutions. These apparatuses shape and maintain a 'Symbolic Order' outside of force and repression (Althusser 1971; Myers 2004).

containers for secrets, seduction and conflict in the narrative<sup>14</sup>, and how this parallels the way I position the home in my paintings. The outward appearance of the homes as a symbol of order and status conceals the complexities of relationships and connections between the family members and their neighbours<sup>15</sup>. The windows and doorways are thresholds between this order and complexity; they hide and reveal the faults, subversions and flaws of the characters through the use of architectural space. The use of the concealed, voyeuristic vantage point or hidden state of observation navigated through architecture in the film creates a menacing sensibility that I, likewise, align my paintings with.

In *Swimming Pool*, the image of the swimming pool is used firstly as a setting for idle leisure, but the unfolding murder mystery plot sees it develop into a more sinister space. This dual understanding of the swimming pool plays on the comforting familiarity of the pool and the relaxed associations it has, as well as the dangerous and menacing possibilities of deep bodies of water, which for me can be associated with drowning and shark attacks. Isolating the metaphoric connections with this one motif brings attention to the cinematic techniques that are used to heighten the sense of calm or threat that it can evoke. Orzon uses techniques that create tensions between the characters and their interactions with the pool<sup>16</sup>. The swimming pool is used as the setting for the main event, which involves seduction, jealousy, violence and murder. While the murder mystery storyline is an extreme portrayal of the potential for menace in suburbia, I am influenced by the shots of the vacant swimming

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<sup>14</sup> The Burnham household is described by Smith (2002, para. 4) as demonstrating a “consumerist-entertainment complex [with] Lester Burnham, the father [who] works in advertising [and] Carolyn, the mother, [who] is a kind of maniac Martha Stewart who struggles to succeed at selling real estate, schools herself with self-improvement tapes, and dotes on material symbols of her achievement (Italian silk upholstery, a Mercedes SUV).” This family strives for fulfillment of material desires, pleasure and the keeping up of appearances (Smith 2002).

<sup>15</sup> The teenage neighbours Jane Burnham and Ricky Fitts begin a relationship that starts with Ricky filming her through their adjacent windows. As their relationship develops, she learns that his father occasionally beats him up. Meanwhile Lester develops an infatuation with Jane’s school friend Angela, which causes him to become aware of his age and body image, sparking a mid-life crisis. He begins lifting weights at night in the privacy of his garage. This is filmed voyeuristically through the garage window.

<sup>16</sup> The murder mystery plot of the film follows the central character Sarah Morton, a seemingly uptight English novelist, and her interactions with a young French woman, Julie. They find themselves unexpectedly sharing a summer retreat at Sarah’s editor, and Julie’s father’s, holiday house in France. The tension between the two characters plays out through Sarah’s secret spying, “while the older woman values peace and privacy, Julie is loud and wanton” (Scott 2003, para. 3). Sarah’s voyeuristic vantage point from her writing desk at the top story of the house looks out onto Julie, often sunbathing or swimming in the pool. Over time, in their “hours of idleness” (Scott 2003, para. 6), the icy relationship begins to thaw. The film takes a dramatic turn, “Mr. Ozon...slyly turns his delicate study in generational and cross-cultural sexual rivalry into a suspense thriller” (Scott 2003, para. 7).

pool at different times of the day and night used throughout the film to divide the action, slowing down the pace and building tension.

These three films knit together stories of complex feelings and experiences in the domestic setting, where the façade or the swimming pool conceals mysteries, secrets and allusions to realities of the darker side of attachments to suburban places. I have found that viewers respond to my work by describing an anecdotal feeling that reminds them of a scene from a film, an idea from a book, a story in the media, or from their own experience. My reflective practice has opened up parallels between film and painting, and these films have been explored in light of responses to the project. The potential for open interpretations, guided by the decisions I make about painting, allows for meaning to be uncovered through a range of interpretive and creative ways. The filmic narratives discussed in this section have been used to demonstrate the possibilities for interpretive responses to things that lay dormant in my work. In this way, my painting practice can start to more strategically set up a space for dissolving borders between the obvious and the opaque. The atmospherics that are shared between these films and my paintings offer insight to the way painting can convey a range of real and imagined sensations of place, guided by the use of tonal, compositional, gestural and figurative techniques.

### **Creating sensation in painting**

The menacing associations of stormy skies and borders between the real and imagined are pictured through the use of combined figuration and abstraction in my work. This approach is reliant on feeling rather than directly describing a particular thing. German art historian Wilhelm Worringer's (1967) notion of empathy helps to position my choice to decisively simplify a figurative space in a way that can both incite imagination and provoke critical thought about suburbia and the display home. Spuybroek (2011) draws on Worringer to inform his notion of sympathy. Worringer (1967) suggests that combined naturalism<sup>17</sup> and abstraction engages with both the beauty of organic forms inspired by living nature and the inorganic crystalline forms of geometry and pattern.

The swimming pool and architecture of the house are explored as motifs that combine abstraction and naturalism to engage the viewer's imagination. Up until this point, I have

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<sup>17</sup> Naturalism refers to realist representations of things. It is used as a synonym for realism or figuration in this exegesis.

made intuitive choices to simplify the watery space of the pool, layering the paint in washes and letting it drip and form organic patterns. The pool reflects a contemplative, abstracted space. In my attempt to understand the role of this contemplative feeling for provoking thought and imagination in this project, I turned to Worringer's notion that geometric abstraction can "create resting-points, opportunities for repose" (1967, 34-35) and naturalism to engage with the "beauty of organic form that is true to life" (1967, 27). This interplay between abstraction and realism serves to locate my representation of landscape in the suburban setting and allows for atmospheric qualities with pervasive feelings of menace to be sensed.

Abstracted space is used to expand the possibilities for imaginative responses to my work. Guided by my desire to sympathise with the complexity of menacing and comforting feelings in suburbia, the use of abstraction was intuitively explored as a technique. Worringer (1967, 41) describes this "urge to abstraction" in art as a way of opening up the viewer's imagination. Using the example of ancient Egyptian art, Worringer (1967, 41) explains that "the original tendency of the ancient cultural peoples was...to win from the unclear factors of perception." By allowing motifs to be abstracted through line or form, the viewer is afforded repose to contemplate the tactile qualities of the artwork (Worringer 1967). I am interested in the tension created through this approach, "for in no other style do extremes and contradiction lie so close together" (Worringer 1967, 118-119). Employing abstracted spaces that bring attention to the materiality of the painted surface can blur the tension between understanding and the unknown.

The illusion of the organic, fluid movement or stillness of water, and the geometric characteristics of architecture in my paintings, altogether seek to create sympathy. The duality of movement and stillness resonates with the calm, restful state of floating in water and how this feeling may easily shift between menace or comfort. The paintings reflect the illusion of perfection in the display village, and the ensuing feeling when this idea falls apart. The possibilities that extend from the duality of expectation and reality are felt through allowing moments of pause and contemplation.

My approach to painting encourages the viewer to enter into the painting by 'being with' the painted marks that make up the image. French philosopher Gille Deleuze ([1981] 2005) provides a more recent understanding of how combining figuration and abstraction can create sensation in painting. In reference to artist Francis Bacon, Deleuze ([1981] 2005) explains the three dimensions that characterise a painting—namely, planes, colour and

the body. These three elements work together in Bacon's work, going beyond the illustrative or figurative, and past abstract form towards the 'Figure,' which Deleuze ([1981] 2005, 31) claims "is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system." I interpret Deleuze's notion of the 'Figure' to align with my exploration of how figurative marks and abstracted marks work together to create a feeling of corporeality, rather than communicate a specific thing. The combination of abstraction and figuration can allow for a multiplicity of feeling, attunement and sensation connected with place.

In contrast to photography or photorealistic painting, simplifying form can allow for the viewer to feel imagined sensations of place. Deleuze ([1981] 2005, 35) explains, "as a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed." Rather than mimicking the real world, my approach to contemporary landscape painting orchestrates sensations of place that depart from illustration or a defined narrative. However, the sensation or feeling that is being alluded to can be specific. Deleuze ([1981] 2005, 110) explains that isolating or displacing elements of figuration can allow sensation to emerge clearly and precisely, which captures the "power of vibration and nonlocalization." Displacement brings attention to the slippage between promise and reality. The disjointed spaces of sky, water and architecture in my work jump between feeling fixed and unfixed. I use a decisive approach to composing a landscape that responds to my real and imagined experiences of suburbia, which can offer multiple associations for the viewer as I invite the projection of shared experiences of imagination and the everyday. These associations are understood through the cultivation of a combined feeling of menace and comfort that unfolds in different ways through the tension between specificity and the unknown.

Australian artist and academic Barbara Bolt (1997) argues that the idea of the 'Figure' and sensation, which for Deleuze was understood in relation to Bacon's paintings, can be applied more widely. Deleuze ([1981] 2005) describes Bacon's work as designed through a 'diagram' made up of lines, zones, brushstrokes and colour. This diagram is used to "break with figuration" (Deleuze [1981] 2005, 101) as it encompasses both rhythm and order, as well as chaos and catastrophe. Deleuze ([1981] 2005, 102) describes breaking through the catastrophe of the painting, "where he or she no longer sees anything and risks foundering: the collapse of visual coordinates." When I am mapping out my 'diagram,' the surface at first feels precious and impenetrable. I stain the canvas with colours to delineate the planes, and then begin building up more recognisable motifs through the application of

varying colour, line and shape. It takes many hours for the surface to begin to suggest depth and three-dimensional space, and the decisions about when to continue and when to stop resonate with the duality Deleuze describes as chaos and order:

painters pass through the catastrophe themselves, embrace the chaos, and attempt to emerge from it. Where painters differ is in their manner of embracing this nonfigurative chaos, and in their evaluation of the pictorial order to come, and the relation of this order with this chaos. ([1981] 2005, 103)

This act of painting, and the challenges of embracing the chaotic feeling between abstraction and figuration, are what drive the decision-making and assemblage of images for much of my painting process.

The uncertainty that I feel about judging how to move forward with a painting, when to apply more paint, when to remove it, and when to stop is positioned in this project as emergent personal knowledge. In other words, as this project progresses my intuitive decision-making process becomes clearer, guided by the feelings that are alluded to in the work. The familiar representations of the suburban setting can be dissolved by a wash or wiping away of paint; things go missing beneath forms and lines are washed away into fields of colour. This allows for the liveliness inherent in the material of paint to contribute to the feeling of liveliness in an otherwise absent scene. Marks are revealed and concealed through layers, creating a feeling of menace in the duality of promise and reality that is pushed and pulled between a sense of control and disorder.

My approach to thinking about and practising painting resonates with ideas of concealed allusions to experiences of suburbia suggested through the abstraction of the swimming pool and display home architecture. By painting 'between things,' the work can resonate with the many hidden sensations and feelings of the suburban landscape. My approach to understanding the process of painting draws on atmospherics that resonate with sensorial qualities of place. For me, these sensorial qualities are made up of unspoken communication: concealed resentments, reconciliation, love, ambivalence and unease. The complexities of home and lived experience form deep connection through memory and are difficult to articulate and full of contradictions and ambiguity. The field of contemporary landscape painting that I am engaged with in this project encourages feeling through the combined use of abstraction and figuration. My representation of

landscape provides an alternative way of imagining and thinking about the artificiality of the display home to position the ideal beside implicit felt connections to place.

### **Weightless foundations**

The display homes that have been explored up until this point were recorded and photographed through visits to display villages. To expand on definitions of real and imagined experiences of place, I began exploring the online display home tour as a means of alluding to the duality of promise and illusion. In *Deep End* (2015) (Figure 17) and *Plunge Pool* (2015) (Figure 21) I test the use of the real estate tour as a compositional starting point and experiment with gestural and figurative painting techniques to engage with contrasting ideas of sympathy and non-place.

Compositionally, *Deep End* and *Plunge Pool* were based on images taken via screenshot from an online tour of two different display homes, both of which were hosted by a Perth-based housing construction company's website. Both properties were available as display homes to visit in person, and the resulting paintings were informed from both in-situ drawings and screenshots from the online video tour. I made compositional choices based on the viewpoints that were unfeasible for me to capture on my visits to the house, including floating above the pool and hovering beside the front entrance of the house. This decision to forge a composition which explicitly denies the real world presence of human interaction within the space and instead privileges the viewpoint granted by a video tour resonates with my intention to subvert a utopian vision of an ideal home. My objective for these paintings is to create a felt connection to place through viewpoint manipulation and, in doing so, to consider the ramifications of the traceless, perfect image of the show home as an impossible ideal.

*Deep End* has a high horizon line to create a sensation of floating over the backyard scene. The substance of water is explored in a 'felt' way that focuses on an engagement with touch through painting. Spuybroek (2011, 256) describes this felt sensation, "feeling takes over where seeing stops, as a seeing-feeling; the seen part leads one into the felt, invisible part, which is not an essence that exits at the core but a veil at the fringes." To enable this seeing-feeling sensation in the work, I have abstracted forms so that they are not photorealistic representations of the thing, but capture the essence of water and concrete surfaces of



Figure 17. Fiona Harman, *Deep End*, 2015, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm.

the house through painterly qualities. The fluid substance of paint mixed together with a thinning or thickening agent sympathises with the fluidity of water and its surface patterns influenced by the activity and weather around it. The viewpoint and the quality of paint used in *Deep End* suggest a duality of being immersed in water, while also floating above the scene. This vantage point departs from the virtual display home tour into an imagined representation of place. The feeling of immersion and floating is created by harmonising the interacting colours, patterns, shapes and surfaces of the painting. This viewpoint on an unoccupied display home encourages an imagined participation by the viewer through the implied feeling of place conveyed through the painting process.

The texture and surface of painting are used to affect the view as the traces of these marks are sensed and felt through a connection to touch. The mark-making in *Deep End* is characterised by adding and subtracting monochromatic paint. This combination of thin glazing and thicker layering varies the surface both texturally and tonally. Thin layers of the underpainting are revealed through wiping back and allowing the stain of thinned down pigment to sink into the weave of the canvas and leave organic marks that form a patina of drips. I use tonal variation of monochromatic blues that range from saturated turquoise blue to desaturated light blue-grey, to the depths of dark blue-grey. Limiting the use of colour brings attention to the surface variation and this application of hue and tone creates an illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface. The hue and tone also reference the prevailing colour scheme of the modern style display home, which is made up of steel posts, glass, rendered concrete, straight edges and vacant space. The thickness of the paint mixed with wax medium creates another layer that, unlike the thinner areas of paint that sink into the canvas, sits on top of the weaved material. I allow for thicker paint to determine a more visceral form of the reflective surface of the water and the mass of receding shadows of the backyard that disappears into the distance around the side of the house.

Spuybroek (2011, 126) links the importance of variation to the ability to create sympathy with the experience of painting; “there must be variation of and between figures.” In this case the figures are the representation of the swimming pool, the concrete wall, path and the fence. These elements resonate with the types of materials and crisp surfaces of the new home. By combining this colour palette and use of perspective and composition with felt applications of paint, the surface takes on a seeing-feeling sympathy with the representation of landscape that has been influenced by Spuybroek’s ideas. The imagined and the real form an expressive duality between cool and sensuous, which is at once menacing and comforting in the way place is engaged with through painting. Such integration of theory and painting

techniques continues in this creative research project by further considering the issue of viewpoint, and harkens back to the filmic devices of anticipation and foreboding.

### **Representations of the domestic non-place**

Drawing on the use of online real estate tours in recording landscapes, my paintings explore the projections of desire, aspiration and longing connected to the duality of promise and reality. The anonymity that virtual space affords relates to contemporary notions of non-place (Gregory 2009). Hammerstiel's photographs, installations and videos explore commodities and the economy of promise. A common link throughout his work is an interest in the way identical, uniform consumer products can transform for the individual. I am interested in the role that imagination plays in this transformation when encountering the stage-like setting of the display home. The ambiguity in Hammerstiel's work lies in the cautious note of irony lingering at its fringes; the images are idyllic and traceless, but they also point out the discrepancies between reality and illusion.

In his series *Instant Vacations I* (2007-2008) (Figures 18 and 19) Hammerstiel photographs scenes from *Second Life*<sup>18</sup> devoid of human figures. He presents the scenes along with quotes at the bottom of the image taken from conversations with the players that reveal the intentions behind their engagement with the game, which overlap and respond to their real life experiences. For example, in Figure 18 the quote reads, “[9:51] Fanny Congrejo: here I feel better, having dreams. meet people, pass the time...”; and in Figure 19, “[4:33] Shyvixen Vella: my inner dreams...can type what i feel better that in rl...can do what i ever want.” Through the use of quotes and imagery, Hammerstiel hints at the second-order image-making that creates the illusion of escape through the game (Trummer 2014). The banal suburban imagery of the screenshot matched with the confessional style quotes hint at an extent of personal suffering, and I make a sympathetic connection with the real experience of the anonymous users and the circumstances surrounding their desire to escape into an imagined world that mimics an ideal reality. This work is a reminder of the value of sanctuary, as “social, cultural and economic structures...remain stereotyped and predictable” (Spiegel 2008, para. 1). Even when given an online platform with endless possibilities, the avatars in *Second Life* still appear to choose to exist in an imagined domestic setting.

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<sup>18</sup> *Second Life* is an online virtual platform where players use “digital representations, called *avatars*” (Varvello et al. 2011, 80; original italics) to interact with each other and virtual objects and environments.

The isolated feeling elicited by the lack of figures in *Instant Vacations I*, animated only by the text, suggests a presence of hopefulness within these empty, vacant domestic spaces. The imagined idyll of everyday suburbia is revered as a place of happiness and contentment; Hammerstiel explains the origin of this yearning,

The idyll in its true original sense really means a type of peaceful, primitive state which is perhaps also accompanied by a feeling of happiness. My work is not intended to be critical towards the idyll but to question ready-made idylls, preconceived desires and longings—promises. (2008, 181)

I am similarly curious about the feeling of longing for a ‘ready-made’ idyll and the tendency for darker realities to be set aside or hidden. Hammerstiel’s snapshots of a virtual suburban landscape leave much to the imagination and allow the viewer to contemplate what realities may lie beyond the boundaries or behind the screen, “the interface between external and internal, between attribution and allusion, visible and invisible, between real and associative” (Hammerstiel 2008, 183). This suggestion of control and the unknown aligns with my approach



Figure 18. (Left) Robert F. Hammerstiel, *Instant Vacations I*, 2007-2008, colour prints on aluminium, cassette frames, acrylic glass, 50 x 65 cm.

Figure 19. (Right) Robert F. Hammerstiel, *Instant Vacations I*, 2007-2008, colour prints on aluminium, cassette frames, acrylic glass, 50 x 65 cm.

to painting. I think about this duality in a more material way to encourage an illusion of depth and a tonality that considers what the imagined space might feel like. I am also questioning this promise, and my exploration into the superficiality of the display home alludes to similar dualities set up in Hammerstiel's work. These dualities consider the significance of the image of the home in shaping our socio-cultural impressions of architecture.

The display home can be positioned as a stereotype to understand promise and desire in the suburban landscape. Hammerstiel places himself at an observational vantage point in his visualisations of the illusion of the ideal domestic setting, taking stock of the consumerism that permeates through our daily lives. *Instant Vacations I* represents a world on the edge of reality, and the photographs reiterate, through the selective use of image and text, virtual realities as an escape from the everyday. In my paintings, the display home is used as a representation of this periphery, where the image of the ideal domestic home is reimagined beyond its intended purpose of perpetuating preconceived promises, refuting the artificiality to engage with the feeling attached to home as a place of belonging.

### **The promise of paradise**

My paintings suggest a sense of something forming, and at the same time falling apart. This trope is compared to Hammerstiel's *Waste Land 3* (2011) (Figure 20) that was made in response to how virtual worlds are built in Second Life. Space can be freely configured and played with in both painting and new media. This commonality highlights the felt surface qualities of my paintings that metaphorically signify the close proximity between utopia and dystopia. Hammerstiel's work captures virtual landscapes as they are being formed, focusing on the glitches that happen when building them. *Waste Land 3* shows a configuration of objects floating above the edge of the simulated ocean. The potential paradise is left teetering on the edge of existence (Hammerstiel 2008). In my painting *Plunge Pool* familiar architectural elements are made to float, fall and recede, like Hammerstiel's objects in *Waste Land 3*, bringing attention to the faults and glitches attached to reality.

In *Plunge Pool* I hint at shadowy and indistinct interior spaces, introducing the use of a closer viewpoint of the house than in my previous work. This results in a more intimate reflection of the display home as it loses the direct association with real estate imagery. In this painting

I create a contrast between the usual welcoming and bright interior of the display home and the dark interior, veiled in shadows. The use of darkness adds to the sense of intimacy, hinting at private space inside. The subtle indication of doorways, lamps and furniture that are concealed with chromatic grey and blue-black acts as a space for projection, imagination and thought. Outside, the swimming pool contains abstracted lumps of water that drip down the side of the walls. The representation of surface implies an impossible transition from the concrete wall into water, which is met by the solid plane of a floating wooden deck. The colour palette introduces warmer tones on the exterior wall, using tinted yellow ochre and burnt sienna to balance the cool blue tones of the water and shadowy interior. I have renegotiated the viewpoint of the virtual display home tour, like in my painting *Deep End*, and heightened the voyeuristic qualities of this idea of a tour through the home.

The sense of voyeurism is heightened by the dark interior and abstracted space of the pool, which repositions the anonymity of the display home that I have appropriated. By reimagining the space using shadows, shapes and a muted colour palette, a feeling of



Figure 20. Robert F. Hammerstiel, *Waste Land 3*, 2011, C-print on acrylic glass box, 45 x 70 x 4 cm.

uncertainty is present within the house in the way rooms are hidden and passages only partially revealed. As in *Deep End*, the pool is painted in a way that suggests a feeling of fluidity. The first layers of paint have dripped down the surface of the canvas, settling organically. I then returned to these drippy forms with more considered marks, creating nuanced tonal variations to solidify the shapes that were created from this process. In representing movement and variation in this way, I explore an illusion of flatness and depth, suggesting the sense of a space falling apart that is similar to *Waste Land 3*. This spatial undoing suggests that the promise wound up in the perfectly presented display home eventually becomes fragmented through the way space sinks, floats and dissolves. Painterly approaches to representation and figuration have been brought together and developed in a way that alludes to fragmentation as a metaphor for the messiness and complexity of lived experience.

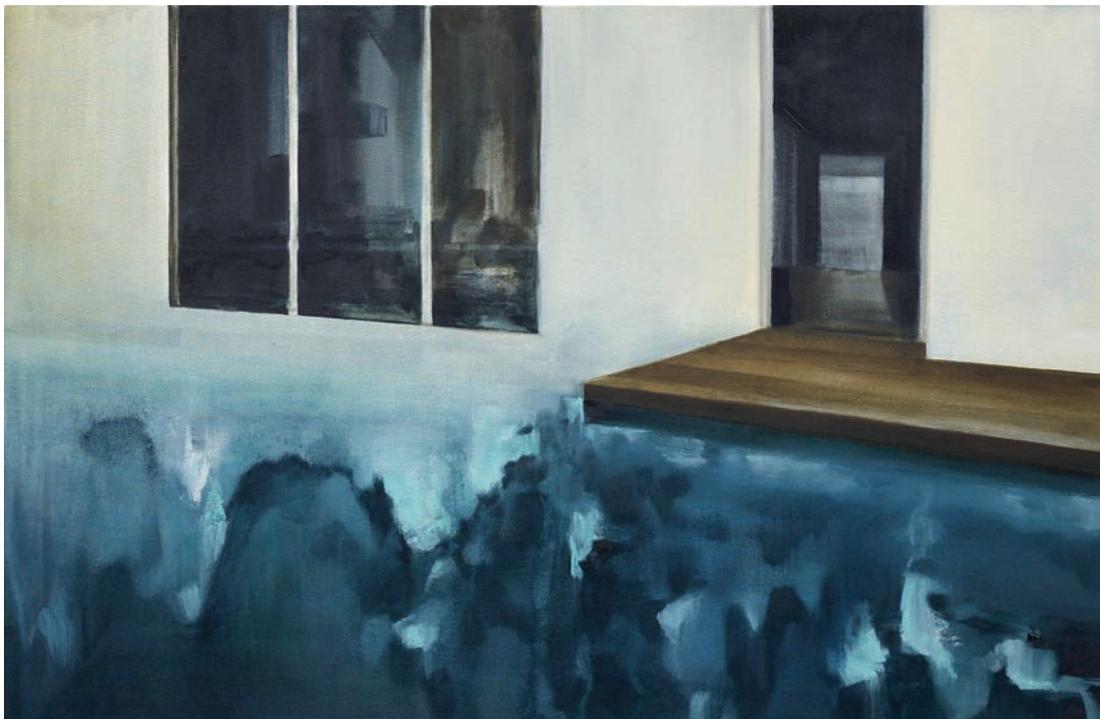


Figure 21. Fiona Harman, *Plunge Pool*, 2015, oil on canvas, 60 x 90 cm.

Painting provides a way of questioning the duality of promise and reality by engaging with touch and metaphor. The tactile, slow process of painting provides a type of immersive engagement through reflection and intuitive connection to remembered and imagined experiences of place. My process of painting builds on the sense of removed observation that Hammerstiel captures in his photographic and installation-based work to provide a sense of intimacy and sympathy with touch, observation and felt understandings of place. The conflation of immersion and observation in my paintings alludes to a multiplicity of remembered and imagined feelings of place in suburbia. The material qualities of paint that have been employed at this stage develop a visual language that allows for a unique 'event' to unfold upon viewing the work, encouraging the viewer to form associations with the image that might have them recall a particular time, temperature or feeling of place tied to suburbia.

The display home provides a glimpse into a suburban utopian ideal. This glimpse encourages seduction by the traceless image of domestic space. However, my paintings question this impossible image of the display home and instead explore the possibilities of making connections between the imagined ideal home and memories and experiences of home. The respective viewpoints from a dissolving wall in *Plunge Pool* and the weightless floating in *Deep End* are used to destabilise the viewer and hint at the fragile foundations of promise and illusion to encourage reflection on the possibility of a more imaginative approach towards visualising the suburban landscape.

### **Series, time and atmosphere**

*Lost Horizon*, *Retreat* and *Veil* (Figure 23) were exhibited as part of *Paradise Point* (2015) in Spectrum Project Space. Work in a series was used as a way to consider movement through space, and the way the size and shape of the canvas can reference the cinematic experience of time and atmosphere. The edges of the pool align across the paintings. To discuss and contextualise this decision to form a visual link through the use of series in my work, I return again to Robert F. Hammerstiel and his installation *Make Yourself at Home VI* (2014) (Figure 22). The ordered and artificial portrayal of a suburban backyard in Hammerstiel's installation implies a sense of homogeneity and repetitiveness (Trummer 2014).



Figure 22. Robert F. Hammerstiel, *Make Yourself at Home VI*, 2014, installation with artificial turf, 3 robot lawnmowers, electronic audio system, 3 charging bays, 4 C-prints on aluminium, cassette frame, acrylic glass, each 184 x 313 cm.

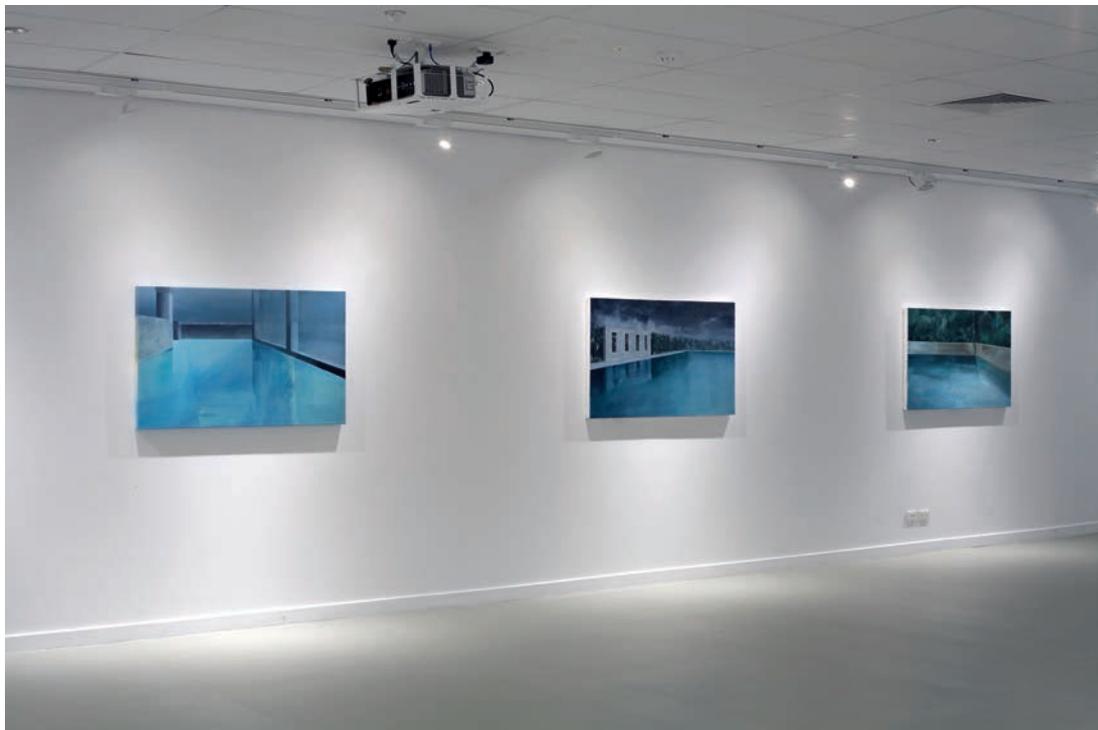


Figure 23. Fiona Harman, *Paradise Point*, 2015, exhibition documentation, photograph.

The comparison between Figures 22 and 23 reveals the importance of the materiality of paint to my work. Hammerstiel's installation (Figure 22) uses large format photographs, artificial turf and robotic lawnmowers to engage with the habitual nature of domesticity (Trummer 2014). The sky is clear and the swimming pool is a crystal aqua blue. Nature is presented in Hammerstiel's work as tame and perfectly maintained. In contrast, my paintings (Figure 23) suggest an overcast, cloudy atmosphere, where the swimming pools are textured and reflect the surrounding architecture and garden motifs in intentionally incongruent ways.

Hammerstiel's photographs show three different views of the same space. I draw on his suggestion of space and the filmic quality of these snapshots. While the landscapes depicted in my paintings are not of the same location, the connected edges and the way tone and colour are used to create a similar feeling of atmosphere establishes a relationship between them as a series. At the same time, I explore different ways of suggesting menacing feelings in each separate painting through the varied use of viewpoints and surface treatment. While Hammerstiel's *Make Yourself at Home VI* suggests an unchanging landscape, my paintings suggest a sense of unfolding menace through the shifting spaces and weather conditions.

In *Lost Horizon* (2015) (Figure 24) I explore extended boundaries within the landscape to exaggerate the potential depth of space. Each geometric plane is differentiated by breaking up the composition through single point perspective. This separation abstracts the areas of the pool, house and sky to explore the evocative potential of simplified space in creating a sense of menace and calm. I draw on ideas of boundaries from the imagined landscapes in computer simulation games *Second Life* and *The Sims*, where you are able to create a space out of pixels. I encourage the viewer to enter into this imagined scene, where you can float through, into, or past the image.

I have built on discoveries in my previous paintings to harness the messiness and control of paint and the representation of light. Using a tonal gradient that shifts from translucent to opaque, the work describes the transition between solid and transparent materials of the house. These tonal and formal experiments engage with how painting can evocatively depict materials such as glass, concrete, stone and metal. A lighter tone has been used for the swimming pool that makes it appear to be glowing from underneath. The gradient of the sky is reminiscent of afternoon light disappearing in the horizon, and together with the desaturated blue-grey hue, this atmosphere suggests an imaginary feeling of time and place. Masked edges are used in this painting to create a clear boundary between the pool, sky



Figure 24. Fiona Harman, *Lost Horizon*, 2015, oil on canvas, 80 x 130 cm.

and architectural spaces. This allows for experimentation with different qualities of paint in these distinct areas to suggest depth. The house on the right and the wall on the left are positioned so that there is no depiction of a solid, horizontal surface. Instead, the viewer is presented with the abstracted surface of the swimming pool as an entry into the painting.

The imagined atmosphere and sense of depth in *Lost Horizon* encourages a distant, foreign feeling of space. I bring attention to what lays dormant or goes unnoticed in a seemingly empty setting by animating it with paint. The animation of surfaces is heightened by the sense of depth in the swimming pool. There is evidence of layers that have been wiped back and reapplied to suggest movement (see Figures 25 and 26). By dragging a large squeegee across the wet painted surface of the pool, a gestural pattern was left that implies motion. Similarly, the layered brushmarks are more evident and gestural than what I have used previously. The evident marks contrast with the blended surface of the pillars and the smooth gradient of the sky. This method of applying oil paint in gestural layers creates sympathy with the qualities of water and its depth, movement and variation, which will be my focus in the next chapter.



Figure 25. (Left) Fiona Harman, *work in progress for Lost Horizon (i)*, 2015, oil on canvas.

Figure 26. (Right) Fiona Harman, *work in progress for Lost Horizon (ii)*, 2015, oil on canvas.

The exploration of depth, atmosphere and boundaries in *Lost Horizon* focuses attention on the gap between the expected everyday function of the house, and the evocative feelings of comfort and menace that can exist behind the façade. Building companies use the display home to promote seductive images associated with aspirational lifestyles. Entertainment patios, home theatres and the ‘dream kitchen’ are combined with advertisement banners and billboards that attempt to create positive associations with the display village: ‘Enjoy!’; ‘Getting you into your home faster!’ Building on the attention to surface in *Lost Horizon*, I adopt a more decisive approach to the way painting can create a slower feeling of time as a means to encourage more oneiric awareness that departs from the mere proliferation of happy memories.

The slowing down of pace and capturing of atmospherics in my paintings engage in the filmic unfolding of events. The shape of the canvas is used to associate with the dimensions of a contemporary television and cinema screen. I draw on the immersive, dream-like, cinematic feeling of Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) where, from a viewer’s perspective, time is felt to move slowly between years, months and seconds. The architecture of the luxury hotel dictates the setting with the narrator of the film describing his movement through space,

I made my way once again along these corridors and through these rooms, in this building that belongs to the past, this huge, luxurious and baroque hotel where endless corridors...Silent rooms where the sound of footsteps is absorbed by carpets so heavy, so thick that all sound escapes the ear. (Resnais 1961, 2:58-3:48)

The narrator's description of time and distance is slow and uncertain. It suggests stillness. In the film, the action is slow; patrons of the hotel stand, statuesque, around the lobby and gardens and corridors of the anonymous hotel. This suggestion of stillness is inherent in my work, where pending action is slowed to create a dream-like feeling through the recording of architectural space.



Figure 27. Fiona Harman, *Retreat*, 2015, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm.

I introduce a sense of time through the use of realism, surface qualities and atmosphere in *Retreat* (2015) (Figure 27). In this painting, a worn water feature stands between the swimming pool and mass of garden hedge. To represent a stormy sky, the paint is pulled and pushed with brushmarks and areas are scraped back with a squeegee. This method moulds tonal variation and varied surface qualities. I have attempted to create a feeling of menace and comfort through the depiction of a stormy sky using cool, chromatic grey hues. According to Bachelard, the experience of storms is often embedded into our memories;

faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body. (1964, 46)

The threat of a storm has the ability to enhance the intimate qualities of the home; its safety, warmth and security. This symbolic meaning attached to the image of the stormy backyard is influenced by the feeling of security and threat. In recalling threatening experiences of storms, one instance stands out for me. While out hiking I found myself walking through the violent lightning and thunderclouds of an unexpected storm. The feeling of exposure and being at the mercy of uncontrollable weather was at once terrifying as it was exhilarating. In contrast to this is the recollection of comfort felt when securely sheltered at home during a stormy night. Beside a fire, under a blanket, while the trees strain and the wind wails, the home takes on physicality in its warmth and security. Through this conflation of experience and the use of imagery taken from a display home, *Retreat* imagines desolation, of being somewhere in-between security and threat. Despite this indefinite feeling of place, the realism used in the depiction of the pool, the water feature, the garden and the clouds creates a recognisable, concrete suburban location. In this state of 'in-betweenness,' the familiar suddenly becomes alien.

Building on this unfixed allusion to place, the signifiers of suburbia in *Veil* (2015) (Figure 28), the third painting in the series, have become further simplified to just the pool, the wall and the garden hedge. The title refers to an act of painting that veils, fractures and dislocates the edges of things. Focusing on the garden, I have explored the way paint can extend realism, creating suggestive marks through dripping, smudging and glazing the paint in layers. Building up layers takes cues from the chance marks left by scraping away paint, and letting it drip and form abstracted shapes. These chance marks have been worked into to create a sense of realism in the depiction of a suburban backyard, while holding onto the fluid quality of paint. While not entirely successful in the extent to which the layers interact with one

another, this painting marked an important step in simplifying forms to expand my language of mark-making and create more inventive variation to use in my description of place and felt associations with home. In my previous paintings, these allusions were explored using a viewpoint of the streetscape, and this cropped view of the garden has allowed for the painterly marks and layering to create a feeling of atmosphere, which is enhanced by the surrounding paintings in the exhibition space.

Spuybroek (2011, 207) uses the notion of the radical picturesque to theorise the intersection of the sublime and beauty, describing it as creating a “smart mess,” full of movement, life and variation. I want to retain the energy and movement of the layering of the paint, while still depicting a recognisable suburban landscape. During the process of painting *Veil*, I attempted to make deep spaces within the foliage that are immersive in the way they operate tonally. The tonal variation and the slight colour shifts between shades of green contribute to my



Figure 28. Fiona Harman, *Veil*, 2015, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm.

representation of foliage that appears as if behind a transparent surface. The picture aims to be veiled and ungraspable.

Although *Veil* represents a simpler composition compared to the others in the series, the mark-making and surface qualities have been experimented with in different ways. I focus on the garden to continue the sense of movement through the backyard setting. Hedges in suburban backyards signify an attempt to retain a sense of privacy and seclusion (Trummer 2014). Trummer (2014, para. 12) claims that this fencing in and isolation through outdoor garden design stems from a fear of “one’s own craving for the Other, the dirty, the untamed, and ultimately the foreign.” *Veil* reimagines the perfectly manicured, brightly coloured, hygienic backyard. It contrasts with the way Hammerstiel photographs the ‘perfect’ backyard in *Make Yourself at Home VII* (2014) (Figure 29), which depicts a backyard swimming pool, surrounded by tall thuja hedges on a bright, clear day.



Figure 29. Robert F. Hammerstiel, *Make Yourself at Home VII*, 2014, C-print on aluminium, cassette frame, acrylic glass, 184 x 313 cm.

The pool is an imitation of a natural setting, which complies with design ideals of hygiene and cleanliness (Trummer 2014). The crystal clear pool, mowed lawn and clipped hedges are a tame, manicured version of a pure form of nature. In *Veil* I explore the tension between this manufactured hygienic ideal and the rough forms of nature that comply with the variation and changefulness of the radical picturesque (Spuybroek 2011; 2009). I use muted colours, depicting a limestone wall that is worn and grimy. The garden grows as an untamed mass of shifting green forms and the swimming pool lacks the crystal clear clarity of Hammerstiel's photographed pool. Both images create a sense of emptiness. Hammerstiel's backyard is empty in the sense of being unused, while my painting has a neglected or abandoned sense of emptiness. Using paint, I construct an imagined setting that employs the massing, packing and configuring of forms that define elements of the radical picturesque, alluding to the imperfections of the everyday. While my explorations in *Veil* do not yet accomplish a resolved approach to layering and complex variation, this investigation into contemporary forms of the picturesque continues as a challenge for my painting practice.

In this chapter, I have explored the tensions that arise from reimagining domestic stage sets that are designed to act as places that suggest comfort and signal security. My painted suburban landscapes are influenced by spaces that exist at the periphery and experiences that create a sense of being in-between. These undefined moments reimagine the promise of comfort and security, suggesting instead the complexities of isolation and emptiness that exist beside the promise of the ideal. The imagery of the dream lifestyle is ironically "devoid of any signs of living life, or of a life lived" (Schmidt 2008, para. 8). In the advertising of commodities, including the display home, desires are traced through simulations of a preconceived sense of yearning. My creative research project investigates different forms used to reposition reality in Hammerstiel's installations and the filmic narratives of *American Beauty*, *Swimming Pool*, *The Swimmer* and *Last Year at Marienbad*. These examples influence how I create outward forms of an imagined reality through painting. This takes into account cinematic, photographic and poetic representations of the picturesque.

## Chapter 5

### Reimagining Menace and Seduction

I have discussed the cinematic references that influence my representation of the display home and its allusions to feelings of place that are veiled, undefined and in-between. In this chapter, I explore the ability for gestural painting combined with realistic motifs to represent adjacent feelings of seduction and menace. The approach builds on ideas about varied surfaces through the use of layering and glazing. These methods allude to in-between spaces that encourage open associations. Shared understandings of place are reflected through the use of thresholds. I position the term seduction to refer to both lifestyle and aesthetics.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, seduction implies trickery or to be led astray<sup>19</sup>. This term is used in this chapter to engage with theoretical ideas of impossibility and utopia. I introduce imagery of closely studied pools and foliage to express a more personal, felt connection to place. This demonstrates how my practice-led research engages with representation in an attentive manner, sensitive to conveying a feeling of time and disquieting atmosphere. Callum Morton's *Valhalla* (2007) (Figure 32) is drawn on as an influential artwork in exploring notions of felt personal narratives in an openly relatable way. This non-specificity also draws on the interpretive freedom of American artist Mark Rothko's colour field paintings and the way abstract feelings can be alluded to through the use of colour, tone and the representation of thresholds.

My attentive engagement with representation at this stage in the project sees a continuing fascination with recording aqueous moments, focusing on the movement and variation of

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<sup>19</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v "seduction" (accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/view/Entry/174733?redirectedFrom=seduction>).

the surface of the swimming pool. My use of realism is discussed in relation to the work of David Hockney and his motivations for painting pools have influenced my project. Hockney's explanations of his process and reflections on painting align with insights I have gained from practice-led research into landscape painting. I identify the complex relationship between landscape painting and the role the viewer has in contributing their own experiences of suburbia. My sensitivity to mark-making, tonality and composition is expressed through a sense of seeing and feeling that imagines the suburban landscape in more expansive and associative ways.

### **Seduction in suburbia**

The notion of seduction is examined by Neil Leach (1999a) in *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. He draws on Jean Baudrillard's *Seduction* (1990)<sup>20</sup> to describe modern understandings of this term specifically in relation to architectural theory:

With the advent of the industrial revolution, seduction became eclipsed by an emphasis on 'production,' with its concern to make everything clear and objectifiable. Seduction, Baudrillard observes, is derived from the Latin *seducer*, 'to take aside,' 'to divert from one's path,' whereas production is derived from *producer*—which can mean 'to render visible' or 'to make appear.' (Leach 1999a, 73; original italics)

The removal of obvious meaning through the considered use of abstracted space in painting can encourage open associations with feelings and experiences tied to place. For me, the contradiction between interpretation and seduction identified by Leach (1999a) can be associated with Žižek's (1989, 25) idea of cynicism that arises from the "distorting spectacles of ideology." Seduction can be seen as both a tool and a means of distraction. With this theoretical insight, seduction is positioned in terms of the aesthetic seduction of the display home, and the seduction of the painted image of the suburban landscape as a way of bringing attention to the ironies and impossibilities of longing and desire.

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<sup>20</sup> I focus here on Leach's interpretation of Baudrillard's work because Leach uses concepts about seduction specifically in relation to architectural theory and critique. Baudrillard's *Seduction* (1990) focuses on the links between sexuality, femininity and seduction and makes some antagonistic statements about feminist theory, as critiqued by Kim Toffoletti (2007).

The seductive capacity inherent in display home imagery is alluded to in my work, while also utilising seduction as a tool to explore the emotive potential of abstraction, metaphor and ellipsis in landscape painting. Metaphor and ellipsis are orchestrated through the rendering of surface qualities of the garden and swimming pool and used to veil one meaning with another, which in this case is an effect that alludes to the complexity of place in the suburban landscape.

Interior stylists and garden landscapers are employed to create an image of instant finish for the display home. The display home is not just the physical structure of the off-the-plan design; it is the attractive way in which it is put together for the appeal of potential buyers. Leach (1999a, 77) says, "Seduction can be put at the service of production." The display home can enchant and draw attention away from the ideological, economic and social realities of the housing estate. By tuning into the solid, fluid, soft and changeable qualities of streetscapes, gardens and pools, I combine representations of observed surfaces with imagined ones. This combination of real and imagined representations of the suburban landscape alludes to the hidden paradoxes of promise and reality found in the display home. The manipulation of the appearance of surface in my paintings is used to challenge fixed ideas of perfection and open up associative experiences with the suburban motifs that I paint.

Furthermore, I contrast the forces and forms that make the suburbs vital and interesting against the homogenous, artificially manicured image of the display home. These vital aspects are characterised by variation, difference and imperfections. By recording traces and variation in surface through landscape painting, I engage more closely in this chapter with the notion of the radical picturesque (Spuybroek 2011). The suburb that I grew up in was characterised by differences. The unkempt, dilapidated houses sat alongside perfect manicured ones. In the display village, the display home is still in the becoming stage, not yet a home but with the potential to become one. At this stage, I identify the more introverted and personal atmospheric complexities as important aspects of place to connect with through painting.

### **Thresholds of home: gardens and pools**

My painting *The Shallows* (2015) (Figure 30) explores attunements with place through a suggestive and shadowy representation of the domestic house façade. I draw on the

curiosity felt when exploring the new housing developments, and explore how this curiosity can be reimagined to capture a sense of the stillness and emptiness of the display home through painting.

Stillness traverses the dualities of intrigue and indifference; between possibility stemming from promise, and impossibility. In *The Shallows* the calm blue-grey gradient of the sky and the foggy desaturation of cool blues and yellows blend in and out, defined by the architectural shapes of the house. The surfaces are separated by the geometric spaces that follow single point perspective. The straight lines of the house juxtapose with the foliage in the garden beds. In contrast to the neat, compartmentalised gardens of the display home, *The Shallows* depicts garden that is only just contained by the rendered concrete walls, and this haze of garden is reflected within the cave-like opening of the entry to the house. The title refers to both the shallow appearance of the water in front of the façade, as well as the socio-cultural implications of intoxicating seduction in its potential for shallow enchantment (Leach 1999a).



Figure 30. Fiona Harman, *The Shallows*, 2015, oil on canvas, 80 x 130 cm.

In building the painted surface, I am sensitive towards developing subtle shifts in tone and colour, creating highlights that disappear into dark spaces and using desaturated colours to blend and create ghostly memories of marks. Feeling these spaces, and using the words 'haze,' 'fog' and 'still,' obscure specific clues about the narrative and instead draw focus to the atmospheric sensations. British philosopher and academic Malcolm Budd (2007) considers how aesthetic properties are ascribed to an artwork through expressions of metaphor or ellipsis. Budd (2007) suggests that aesthetic properties are determined by how phenomenological impressions, or higher-order perceptions, of an artwork make people feel. I am cautious not to align my understanding of art with interpretive, didactic or communicative analysis, but rather suggest that the impression of a still and hazy atmosphere in *The Shallows* acts like an ellipsis to allow the viewer to respond to the feeling of the landscape alluded to in the work.

The colours, forms, patterns and surfaces of a painting knit together as we encounter it. Spuybroek (2011, 227) claims that "things do not meet without a veil between them; this is not a mediation but the actual taking on of a pattern during an encounter"—and he relates this to painting: "they are simply like forms extending onto...canvases." These surfaces and patterns reveal a sympathetic exchange that influences the way the work is interpreted. By suggesting a hazy atmosphere in *The Shallows*, the viewer is encouraged to feel the stillness and the obscured focus of the suburban landscape. Ambiguity is intentionally used to leave space open for interpretation by selectively omitting details. This use of ambiguity draws from the filmic qualities of stillness and immersion that can build tension and bring pause, as in the slow feeling of time in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) discussed in the previous chapter. The ambiguity resonates with filmic composition and the thresholds between seeing-through-and-between to allow for a sense of immersion into the different planes depicted in the painting. The shift in tone and transparency allows the viewer to be able to feel the garden, the roughness of the rendered concrete, the solidity of the wooden deck and be confronted by the shadowed, cavernous entry into the house. These technical explorations of painting in my work are used as a process of developing affective suburban landscapes<sup>21</sup>, which guide and reflect feelings of seduction into the comforting familiarity, subtly juxtaposed with a sense of menacing unknown.

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<sup>21</sup> I refer to suburban landscapes that encourage associations with feelings, memories and tensions of suburbia, informed by both lived experience and popular culture, including film, television, and music. The film *Boyhood* (2014) directed by Richard Linklater is particularly evocative of a multiplicity of suburban experiences of childhood and adolescence, including the joys of attachment and love, and the tensions of divorce and displacement. Similarly, Canadian band Arcade Fire's album *The Suburbs* (2010) alludes to the suburban landscape as being



Figure 31. Fiona Harman, *New Featurism*, 2015, oil on canvas, 110 x 150 cm.

In my painting *New Featurism* (2015) (Figure 31) colour is used to unite the chairs, pot plant, pillars and ledge of the garden wall. Warm light brown tones are used with cool blues and green to create a sense of depth and form. The varied brown hues used in the depiction of pillars create a mottled, reflective effect. This reflective quality is more subdued in the water, making the swimming pool appear as a void. The pool shifts between appearing empty and full, revealing shadowy depths. I was working from an image from a display home magazine and tonal sketches.

The large scale of *New Featurism* and complexity of the foliage, light and perspective required more robust visual cues to create a tangible feeling of place. While the use of preparatory studies has been an important step throughout this creative research project, this realisation led me to reconsider my approach to the way I assembled images. I subsequently began to collect a broader range of photographs and spent time making sketches from life to inform the representation of light and form for the next series of paintings. My focus shifted towards developing a more attentive fixation on the translucency and opacity of paint, and on observing surfaces from life to develop depth of space, time and feeling. By critically reflecting on my approach to painting the garden and architectural motifs in *New Featurism*, I established new techniques of assemblage to develop the seeing-feeling encounter of a painting.

### **Allusion to suburban stories in art**

The display home is a model of a house built for the potential buyer to consider the possibilities and various limitations of design<sup>22</sup> and I am interested in exploring the potential that lies in the sinister and seductive qualities of this type of architecture. Callum Morton's installation *Valhalla* was exhibited in the Australian Pavilion at the 52nd International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2007. His recreation of his architect father's self-designed family

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both profound and mundane, reflected through lyrics that resonate with shared experiences. Music journalist Ian Cohen (2010, para. 2) describes *The Suburbs* as "a generously paced collection of meditations on familiar responsibility, private disappointments, and fleeting youth," it projects personal narratives into a collective experience of suburban attainments; of yearning, melancholy and youthful rebellion.

<sup>22</sup> This is considered in relation to Dovey's (1999) assertion that model houses function as a primary way to market new suburban housing and offer a reflection of the cultural values that drive the contemporary suburban condition. I would add that, from my observations, the designs in Australia are also largely dictated by economic limitations so as to suit a range of budgets, as well as restrictions set out by building guidelines (Shorehaven 2016).

home, which he lived in during his teenage years, is depicted as a ruin. Charred and bullet ridden, the monumental installation allows the audience to move through it. This installation resonates with my fascination for hidden associations with the home and with the way buildings can challenge our expectations of architectural space. The representation of architecture can resonate with shared experiences of place, both real and imagined.

The intrigue in *Valhalla* lies, for me, in its suggestion of a multiplicity of associations with the urban and suburban landscape. The installation appears from the outside as a ruin or abandoned place, and is repurposed for an art context which then dictates an unexpected way of interacting with it. The work alludes to personal memories that can be extrapolated to refer to wider political and social considerations; “it is a monument to all those skeletal forms left dangling after disaster strikes, when everything and everyone is lost and I only see it as an image I do nothing about” (Morton 2007, 114). This sense of disconnectedness is metaphorically alluded to in the dysfunctional lifts inside the structure that lead to nowhere, as well as the associations with global disasters that come from the bullet holes and damaged walls.



Figure 32. Callum Morton, *Valhalla*, 2007, steel, polystyrene, epoxy resin, silicon, marble, glass, wood, acrylic paint, lights, sound, motor, 465 x 1475 x 850 cm.

While I have only seen the documentation of this work, the photographs and conceptual underpinnings resonate with my ideas about allusions to both understandings of suburbia experienced through the media and recollections of personal narratives of home. This duality evokes a simultaneous calm and menacing feeling of place. Australian writer Stuart Koop (2007, 121) reflects on the possible narratives that are evoked by Morton's *Valhalla*, "it is a symbolic act of terror, perhaps difficult to disentangle from fond memories and awkward moments, dreams, longings and fears, which lodge forever in all our family homes." The ruin of his modernist family home fitted out with a homogenous, corporate style foyer uses representation to provoke questions about the utopian promise of modernism and the realities of home, while alluding to the futility of perfection. The utopian ideals of the house are paired with the anonymity of the non-place foyer, which work together to create a 'monument' to the intersecting imagined and real places (Hughes 2012). Considering the theoretical underpinnings of *Valhalla* has allowed me to gain deeper understanding of how the complexity tied to personal attachments to home and conceptual associations of non-place can be communicated through metaphoric representation.

### **Menace, multiplicity and ambiguity**

The complexity of personal attachments to home guides my representation of thresholds in my paintings. To explain the role of thresholds in contributing to a menacing indication of feeling and how this is conveyed to the viewer, I discuss theoretical ideas behind the abstract expression of Mark Rothko. This consideration has uncovered insights into my experimentation with abstracted marks within representational painting as a strategy for employing affective visual language.

The expression of feeling in painting is reliant upon the use of a visual language that cannot always be fully communicated through words (Budd 2007). Philosopher and theorist Derek Matravers (2013) considers the way Rothko's painting *Black on Maroon* (1958) (Figure 33) can express feeling and spatial depth through a two-dimensional surface. Rothko achieves three-dimensional illusion using scale, tone, colour and composition, which work together to create a depth of space that can be experienced through a range of interpretive responses. The two lighter rectangles depicted in the foreground, lighter in colour than the background, appear as two pillars. However, they could also be interpreted as windows, doorways or



Figure 33. Mark Rothko, *Black on Maroon*, 1958, oil paint, acrylic paint, glue tempera and pigment on canvas, 267 x 381 cm.

pools; they give the impression of portals or thresholds to another place. The ambiguity developed in this depiction of floating rectangular shapes can be attributed to the gestalt effect<sup>23</sup> and the perception that the rectangles seem to sink or float into and/or on top of the dark colour field background. This allusive depiction of portals is comparable to the way I use the swimming pool as a threshold between the flatness of the canvas and the implied representation of depth in the water.

To understand ways painting can indicate feeling through associations developed by the artist's choice of hue, tone, shape, scale and composition, I draw on art critic David Sylvester's interpretation of Rothko's work and how the latter manages to evoke a disembodied feeling of menace:

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<sup>23</sup> The gestalt effect refers to the theory of perception identified by the Gestalt school of psychology, which was founded by Dr. Max Wertheimer in Germany in 1912. The theory demonstrates how people organise and group what they see in a visual sense into a perception of a whole (Zakia 2013). The figure-ground dynamic is affected by the context of seeing both at the same time; "the Gestalt laws of proximity (nearness), similarity, continuity, and closure describe how grouping occurs within a context or field" (Zakia 2013, 26).

Here we are faced with a highly ambiguous presence which seems, on the one hand, ethereal, empty, on the other solid and imposing, like a megalith. It is a presence that alternates between seeming to be receptive, intimate, enveloping, and seeming to be menacing, repelling...‘Often, towards nightfall’, Rothko once said to me, ‘there is a feeling in the air of mystery, threat, frustration—all of these at once. I would like my painting to have the quality of such moments.’ (Sylvester, quoted in Matravers 2013, 54)

The abstracted spaces of the rectangles alternate between indicating a feeling of intimacy and menace through Rothko’s use of ambiguous depth enacted through the interplay between hue, surface and scale. Influenced by Rothko’s representation of complex feeling through abstracted and ambiguous space, I draw on the thought, touch and imagination that contribute to sensing out and reacting to the atmospheric qualities of place. When painting, I find myself entering alternating states of immersion, where I am acting on an intuitive level, and reflection, which allows me to pull back and make decisions relative to the conceptual drivers of the project.

The viewer is encouraged to sense an abstract expression of feeling in my paintings, alluded to in the interplay between intimacy and menace. Sylvester claims that *Black on Maroon* expresses feelings of menace and melancholy alongside ethereal and more fragile sensations. Rothko’s paintings are looked upon by Sylvester (quoted in Matravers 2013, 64) as “a depiction of something beyond comprehension and understanding.” This assessment of Rothko’s work as eliciting emotions that are incomprehensible or resistant to articulation opens up possibilities for sensation and feeling to operate in an affective manner, to be interpreted in multiple ways for the viewer.

While my approach to painting differs from Rothko’s fields of colour, theories on the way emotive expression operates to evoke feeling is useful in reflecting on my choice to use abstracted marks and figurative spaces. Building up the paintings in areas of stained canvas surface, I push and pull between figuration and abstraction in order to find a balance between the depictions of recognisably suburban references. Colour fields act as immersive spaces in order to elicit emotive responses. This results in the paintings creating a state of both immersion and removed observation, which responds to the duality of comfort and menace that has come to underpin this creative research project. This insight has influenced my choice of subject matter, combining found images with my own photographs to focus

more closely on specific foliage and water textures. This thoughtful and more personal combination of source material informs the way I treat the surface in my next series of work.

### The Seductive swimming pool

*Holidaying at Home* (2015) (Figure 37) and *Private Paradise* (2015) (Figure 41) were developed as a diptych, using a similar colour palette and approach to building up the painted surface. These two paintings bring together the consideration of the perfection of the display home and the complexities of the lived home in a way that challenges lifestyle seduction to engage with a feeling of place that can be both menacing and alluring. The seduction in these two paintings occurs through a balance of realism and abstraction that is at once ambiguous and telling; a space described through the representation of ripples of water, reflections, the considered placement of brushmarks, and the simplification of colour.



Figure 34. (Left) Fiona Harman, *Study for Holidaying at Home*, 2015, charcoal on paper, 54 x 82 cm.

Figure 35. (Right) Fiona Harman, *Study for Private Paradise*, 2015, charcoal on paper, 54 x 82 cm.

Building on the insights gained from my previous painting *New Featursim*, the works discussed in this section were developed from multiple studies and photographs to capture a felt and tangible feeling of light and atmosphere. Each composition was based on a found image, combined with foliage and swimming pool studies from places where I spent time gathering photographs and repeatedly drawing, including a community swimming pool and the gardens around my studio (see Figures 34 and 35). This assemblage of images allowed for realism and abstraction to be used in decisive and felt ways.

My observed and attentive representation of water is informed by Hockney's representation of pools and the way he describes the assemblage of his paintings. Inspiration for his paintings often come from chance encounters with found imagery in magazines and catalogues combined with his own photographs and sketches. Hockney's explanation of painting *The Room, Tarzana* (1967) (Figure 36) resonates with the way I reflect upon my own choices and methods:

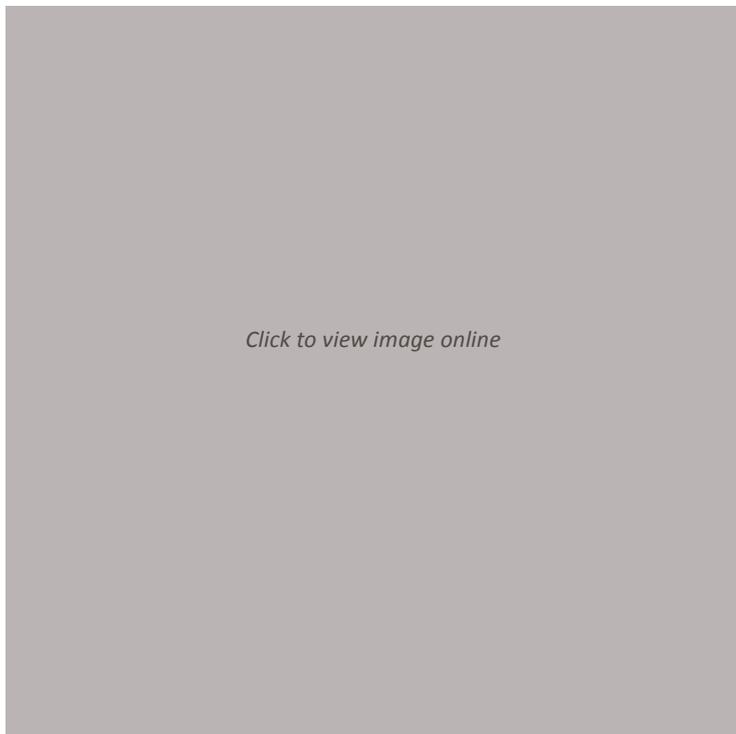


Figure 36. David Hockney, *The Room, Tarzana*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 241 x 241 cm.

The source for the picture originally was a photograph in the San Francisco Sunday Chronicle, a colour photograph of a room; just an advertisement for Macy's. The photograph caught my eye because it was so simple and such a direct view...I thought, it's marvellous, it's like a piece of sculpture, I must use it. And of course I must put a figure on the bed, I don't want it just empty, so I'll paint Peter lying on the bed. (1979, 124)

Hockney's retelling of how *The Room, Tarzana* was put together using a found picture and the decision-making that drove him align with my approach at this stage in the project. For both *Holidaying at Home* and *Private Paradise* the images came from a Vogue Living magazine and I used phrases from the article as titles for the paintings. I was similarly struck by the simplicity and structural composition of these images, which became the compositional platform for my own sketches and studies. The process of studying, sketching and painting from a found image allows for a transformation of surface and space as forms are added, simplified or left out of the original picture.

*Holidaying at Home* depicts part of a swimming pool, wall and garden. The pool, path, wall and garden are part of the original picture. The water and foliage in the original picture was flat and confined, so the composition was combined with the shapes and forms of the water and plants that I had spent time closely studying. Combining this imagery, I have experimented with ways of simplifying the forms so that the plants appears to spill out from the light source above, while the dark spaces within this foliage create receding shapes. This process has allowed for the abstracted and figurative marks of foliage and water to be more sensitively and decisively treated.

Both the foliage and water in *Holidaying at Home* are treated in a similar way to explore a more realistic fluid space, investigating the impact of movement. My observation of water and the challenge of recording a constantly moving subject was an important shift in this creative research project, and it resonates with Hockney's (1978, 104) musings about his iconic swimming pool paintings: "it is a formal problem to represent water, to describe water, because it can be anything—it can be any colour, it's movable, it has no set visual description." While water in rivers or the ocean relates to the colour of the sky, the colour of the surface of a swimming pool is determined by the colour of its concrete base. As Hockney (1978, 104) explains, "its dancing rhythms reflect not only the sky but, because of its transparency, the depth of the water as well." His devotion to testing ways to record the patterns, wetness and reflection of water resonates with my own fascination with the pool.



Figure 37. Fiona Harman, *Holidaying at Home*, 2015, oil on canvas, 130 x 90 cm.

The pool water is affected by breeze, depth, movement and displacement, and trying to capture this is a mesmerising process. *Holidaying at Home* engages my fascination with tuning into these subtleties and considering ways oil painting can be used to provide a solution for capturing the “infinite variety of patterns of material that the pool can be made from” (Hockey 1979, 104). It is not only the infinite pattern and variety of shapes that make up the surface of water, but also the suggestion of time that can be translated through painting the image of the pool using oil paint. Hockney’s *A Bigger Splash* (1967) (Figure 38) was painted from a swimming pool building instructional book. He reflects on the time that it takes to make a splash in a pool in relation to the time taken painting it, “I loved the idea of painting this thing that lasts for two seconds; it takes me two weeks to paint this event that lasts for two seconds” (Hockney 1978, 124). The malleability of oil paint allows for this extension of time; it can be layered and scraped away. The time spent making marks and layering a surface is recorded, and the duality of fleetingness and infinity can be felt by the viewer.

Hockney’s paintings are vibrant and colourful, and he employs a more crisp realism than I do in my paintings. While the realism in his work is apparent, his methods for creating it are experimental. He describes the shifting textures of his painting *Rubber Ring* (1971) (Figure 39) as having “an uncannily real effect. I realized it’s because your eye reads different



Figure 38. (Left) David Hockney, *A Bigger Splash*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 242.5 x 245.9 cm.

Figure 39. (Right) David Hockney, *Rubber Ring*, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 122 cm.

textures in the painting. It's quite subtle. Most people feel it; it isn't just me" (Hockney 1976, 241). Hockney's musings on feeling the surface and its implied texture resonate with my own reflections on the importance of these aspects in creating an abstracted realism through painting. I have developed a more experimental approach to texture and shifting surface qualities, but this technique could be expanded much further to heighten the differences between fluid water, rough concrete and organic foliage.

My attentiveness to surface and variation has made me more conscious of how other painters use these fundamental principles. Hockney's pool in *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with two figures)* (1972) (Figure 40) shimmers with light and movement, reflecting the glow of the summer's sun; "it's very strong Californian light, bold colour, bold skies" (Hockney 1976, 124). *Holidaying at Home* depicts a different feeling of light that is muted and dark. The dark space beneath the rippling water suggests something shadowy beneath the surface. To develop thresholds that reflect a shift between wet and dry, through and beneath, glazed



Figure 40. David Hockney, *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with two figures)*, 1972, acrylic on canvas, 213.5 x 305 cm.

layers of semi-transparent brown and blue have been applied to create reflective light that both sink and float on the surface of the canvas. This glazing approach creates an immersive feeling, using realism to represent the pool as a wet, fluid space. The flat off-white space of architecture is used to experiment with the relationship between figure and ground. Like Rothko's *Black on Maroon*, there is an abstract element that causes some areas of the off-white space to both float and recede. The realism used to render the path surrounding the pool creates a void on the left side that becomes more solid and three dimensional towards the right side of the painting.

The abstraction of shapes and forms in *Holidaying at Home* engages with the idea of representing an ellipsis, which Budd (2007) describes as a way of expressing something that resembles an emotion. Leaving something out is a way of building tension. The term ellipsis can be used in poetry and creative writing as a way to indicate a sense of irony or a pause in understanding. The irony that comes with longing for an impossible, traceless image of home is harnessed in my paintings to explore the simultaneously seductive and menacing feelings of suburban place. The use of abstracted marks and control over the opacity and translucency of the paint alludes to the shape of a figurative plant, or the depth and reflective qualities of water, in an ambiguous way. This type of abstraction—achieved through heightening tone, the selected removal of detail, and changing forms through building up glazed layers—is a device used to describe place. This description invites the viewer to project their own interpretations of remembered gardenesque locations, not just suburban but parks, forests and bushland, referencing a multiplicity of images. This idea is influenced by Beate Fricke's (2015) theory that the assemblage of images that develop thresholds within a painting provides insight and variance between the maker's intentions or decisions and the viewer's reception. In other words, the spaces that recede and emerge in *Holidaying at Home* are guided by myself as the maker, but do not completely control the viewer's perception of the space. This possibility of decisively inciting a multiplicity of images through painting has emerged as an important theoretical trajectory in my project. It resonates with my discussion of non-place in relation to the transitory nature of place. By suggesting thresholds, I question what lies between non-place and place. I allude to this by drawing on homogenous suburban architecture, and personal observations and recordings of places that I know, combined through the method of layering and veiling in oil painting.

In *Private Paradise* I have reimagined the composition from the magazine image by instilling it with ambiguous shapes inspired by dense foliage and shifting patterns of water. During the



Figure 41. Fiona Harman, *Private Paradise*, 2015, oil on canvas, 130 x 90 cm.

process of assembling the image I also chose to heighten the light and dark tonal variations through my charcoal study (Figure 35). The dark stairs recede into the almost black space of the garden. The exaggerated darkness in *Private Paradise* alludes to the things that go missing in darkness and the more melancholic experiences of suburbia left out of the perfect image of home. Australian artist Bill Henson uses the suggestion of thresholds to create a comparable feeling of concealing and revealing through shadows and light;

I often use the shadows or the absence of light to reintroduce some uncertainty, some mechanism that causes us to wonder. Often it's what goes missing in the shadows or how you make a seemingly pedestrian or mundane object strange again. (Henson, quoted in Dickie 2013, para. 10)

I am seeking out the strange in the seemingly mundane image of suburbia by instilling it with personal observations that can translate to wider experiences of tensions and fascinations with suburbia. I want the feeling of place to be experienced on different levels of engagement; the golden glow of the light tones seduce, while the dark uncertain spaces destabilise. The use of simplified shapes in the foliage and water allows for the painterly marks to be felt as fluid and veiled. The representation of water compares to Hockney's simplified ripples to allude to constant movement, however I also show part of the water as still and flat in order to de-familiarise and add an element of ambiguity. This ambiguity is also enacted in the foliage, which forms suggestive shapes, rather than descriptive realism. These techniques invite the viewer to fill in the blanks. I have aimed for the landscape to appear to be turning into something else using tone, colour and shape as thresholds between the known and the unknown.

The paintings discussed in this final chapter reflect my fascination with the menace and seduction underpinning the seemingly mundane suburban landscape. Piecing together fragments of memories, observations and recollections of suburban experience and putting them alongside the emptiness and anonymity of the manufactured sense of homeliness of the display home, I have explored how dualities can encourage interpretive possibilities and encourage the viewer to contemplate as they look, feel and sense the landscape. The viewer is invited to engage with these paintings and recognise the image of the display home as an illusion or ellipsis for a simultaneous feeling of menace and seduction. I encourage the viewer to sense the menacing tensions that simmer beneath the promise of paradise that come with complex shared experiences of home and place in Australia.

## Conclusion

By engaging in practice-led research, my project provides ways of alluding to the embedded feelings and atmospherics of the landscape. Through representations of the display home, I bring attention to the hidden paradoxes of suburbia and the twinned idea of promise and reality. My experimentation with surface variation through massing, packing and configuring marks harkens to a range of real and imagined experiential possibilities. These possibilities aim to provoke thought and evoke feeling about the imperfections of the everyday that go missing from the image of the ideal. The ideal domestic home has been reimagined beyond the perpetuated promises of the display home to illuminate the sensed and felt aspects of the home, drawing on personal connections, associated narratives and conceptual underpinnings of suburbia in Australia. These sensorial qualities of disquiet, ambiguity, love and connection tied to the atmospherics of home are sympathised with through the act of painting. I paint 'between things' by using a combination of abstracted and figurative techniques to encourage associative freedom with my work and its allusions to the complex notion of place.

I have addressed the fabricated sense of homeliness characterised by new housing developments and acknowledged the longing and desire that underpins the notion of the ideal home. These are highlighted as key factors that have contributed to the proliferation of off-the-plan homes in Australia. This insight has been understood in relation to contemporary and historical theories about suburban design and architecture. My reflections on the display home and understandings of the contemporary suburban landscape in Australia have been informed by Australian theorists Tony Hall, Kim Dovey, Lee Stickells and Tim Gregory. I have drawn on their ideas about the social and cultural

implications of suburbia. These implications are measured by definitions of home and place, responding to the ideas of Yi-Fu Tuan, Caroline Speed, Kathleen Stewart, Christine Garnaut and Irene Cieraad. Through these conceptual understandings of place, home and suburbia, I have established that the display home is a quintessential example of promise, while the lived experience of home is more closely associated with a sense of belonging and attachment. The notion of home and place, and the influence of underlying utopian elements of garden suburb planning, have informed my understanding that the alternating feelings of comfort and menace can proliferate false promises. This proliferation is seen in the marketed image of the display home.

The dualities of alienation and familiarity, perfection and illusion, order and messiness, and menace and seduction have been positioned as key aspects that articulate the tension between place and non-place in suburbia. These dualities have been visualised in my paintings through empty representations of architectural space. I have aimed for the work to convey a sense of menace lingering beneath usual associations of hope and desire tied to the commoditised image of the display home. Ironically, paintings are considered desirable cultural objects that, like the display home, can offer an immersion into a seductive place. The work has developed from attempting to represent a conceptual, cynical version of a domestic utopia, to painting the suburban landscape in a way that engages with a deeper sympathy towards real and imagined experiences of place and home.

Key works by Callum Morton, Gerhard Richter, Joanna Lamb, Robert F. Hammerstiel, Giorgio de Chirico, David Hockney and Mark Rothko have been examined to reveal connections and highlight differences regarding methodological and conceptual approaches to the notions of promise and reality, feeling and landscape. These comparisons have helped me to understand intuitive insights and reach a resolved approach to creating sympathy through surface variation, compositional choices, and the representation of atmosphere. While my approach to exploring links and references has not been linear, the entangled connections that I have attempted to make explicit allow for a deepened understanding of my practice.

My attention to touch and surface, the fluidity and variable translucency and opacity of paint, and the relationship between organic and geometric forms, was informed by reflections on the ideas of Wilhelm Worringer, Lars Spuybroek and Gilles Deleuze. In *Holidaying at Home* and *Private Paradise*, I employed painting techniques of realism and gestural mark-making that were particularly responsive to aqueous moments and felt connections to place. Practising the techniques of figurative and abstracted mark-making over the course

of this project has made me a better painter, and this improving skill has been directed at developing more convincing ways of encouraging projection into another kind of place. By evoking feeling through surface and representation, the work reaches beyond the image of the marketed display home, alluding instead to atmospheric associations with the landscape. I have developed an approach to contemporary landscape painting that draws attention to the darker, more ambiguous side of suburbia that exists beside the comforting and luxurious image that is portrayed as an ideal in Western society. Beyond my personal insights and technical development as a painter, I contribute to relevant knowledge about my disciplinary field of landscape painting. I have aligned my process and methodology with Deleuze's ([1981] 2005, 34) notion of the logic of sensation, a "sensation has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system, vital movement, 'instinct,' 'temperament' – a whole vocabulary common to both Naturalism and Cezanne) and one face turned toward the object (the 'fact,' the place, the event)." The illogical, messy and uncertain nature of oil painting as a haptic process of finding an image goes beyond analytical thinking, holding possibilities for communicating invisible forces that act of the nervous system and are fixed in place through feeling and sympathy.

Practice-led research can be revisited as a strategy for imaginatively exploring the complexity of place, both for myself and also for other practitioners working in the cross-disciplinary fields of contemporary landscape painting and architectural practice and theory. The process of reflection and attentive observation has been used to uncover and disentangle insights within my project. The struggle of combining chance, messiness and order in oil painting contributes to ways of knowing by engaging with thought and feeling to rethink the experience of suburbia in meaningful ways. Painting is used to think through complex concepts of sensation and sympathy, providing insight into the value of cultivating connections to place, home and belonging over and above images of unachievable material ideals in the contemporary world.

In exploring the relevant theories concerning the utopian underpinnings of the suburbs, including garden suburb ideology and the dream of home ownership, I hope to contribute to understandings of the ongoing formation of cultural identity in Australia. These theories of suburbia are positioned with my understanding of sympathy and affective visual language. The superficiality of the display home is reimagined through oneiric, imagined and remembered associations with place. These sympathetic representations of the landscape have been continually provoked by viewers' anecdotes and stories, both imagined and remembered from life, or from a film or other representations of suburbia. By alluding

to physical and conceptual traces, time, depth and atmosphere, the superficiality and impossibility of the display home can be contrasted with felt attachments to place to question the desire and longing for fabricated perfection.

At the conclusion of this project, I consider future ideas for imaginative and thoughtful engagements with the landscape and water through painting. While the found image of the display home in brochures and advertisements lend themselves to appropriation and critique, my photographic and in-situ documentation of the landscape provided an understanding of the way light influences the feeling of time, and the way the atmosphere feels as clouds shift overhead. By tuning into my surroundings when seeing and feeling the landscape, I can apply the knowledge gained from this project to further enquiries into the felt sensibilities of the landscape. I am excited about the possibilities, for example, of exploring the way the display home settles into the landscape over time, and how fluctuations of neglect and care for gardens, swimming pools, interiors and façades can imply lived experience and a tangible feeling of place. The atmospherics of relaxation, leisure, playfulness, sacredness and time attached to aqueous moments of the swimming pool can also be further explored by drawing on the ambiguity of abstracted space, and the felt qualities of representation. The watery spaces have given rise to emerging concerns about thresholds and melancholy, which contribute to understandings of sensation in painting.

For this project, I have engaged in practice-led research through painting to question the proliferation of promise in the marketed display home and illuminate the complex entanglements of place, both real and imagined. The main significance of this project exists in the associative freedom and sympathy allowed by affective visual language in painting, which can resonate with multiple experiences of place. Through abstracted and figurative combinations of atmosphere, hue, tone and composition I have developed an approach to painting that responds to the thresholds, traces and slippages that exist in real and imagined representations of the landscape.

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Figure 32. Callum Morton. *Valhalla*. 2007, Steel, polystyrene, epoxy resin, silicon, marble, glass, wood, acrylic paint, lights, sound, motor, 465 x 1475 x 850 cm. September 24, 2016. [http://www.roslynxley9.com.au/artists/27/Callum\\_Morton/552/40194/](http://www.roslynxley9.com.au/artists/27/Callum_Morton/552/40194/)

Figure 33. Mark Rothko. *Black on Maroon*. 1958. Oil paint, acrylic paint, glue tempera and pigment on canvas, 267 x 381 cm. Tate Modern Collection. Accessed September 24, 2016. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rothko-black-on-maroon-t01031>

Figure 34. Fiona Harman. *Study for Holidaying at Home*. 2015. Charcoal on paper, 54 x 82 cm. Photograph by the artist.

Figure 35. Fiona Harman. *Study for Private Paradise*. 2015. Charcoal on paper, 54 x 82 cm. Photograph by the artist.

Figure 36. David Hockney. *The Room, Tarzana*. 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 241 x 241 cm. Accessed December 27, 2016. <http://exploregam.com/davidhockney-the-room-tarzana-1967-internationalpop-walkerartcenter-walkerartcenter/>

Figure 37. Fiona Harman. *Holidaying at Home*. 2015. Oil on canvas, 130 x 90 cm. Photograph by the artist.

Figure 38. David Hockney. *A Bigger Splash*. 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 242.5 x 245.9 cm. Tate Modern Collection. Accessed September 24, 2016. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hockney-a-bigger-splash-t03254>

Figure 39. David Hockney. *Rubber Ring*. 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 91 x 122 cm. Accessed December 1, 2016. [http://www.hockneypictures.com/images/3-works/1-paintings/70/large/rubber\\_ring\\_71.jpg](http://www.hockneypictures.com/images/3-works/1-paintings/70/large/rubber_ring_71.jpg)

Figure 40. David Hockney. *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with two figures)*. 1972. Acrylic on canvas. 213.5 x 305 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection. Accessed September 24, 2016. <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/L2014.5/>

Figure 41. Fiona Harman. *Private Paradise*. 2015. Oil on canvas, 130 x 90 cm. Photograph by the artist.

## Appendix

This section contains material that documents my works in progress, exhibition catalogues and artwork for this project.

All photographs are by the author.

### FIONA HARMAN *Paradise Point*

Spectrum Project Space  
Edith Cowan University  
July 10 - July 23 2015



#### Acknowledgements

A special thank you to my supervisors Annette Condello, Dianne Smith and Nicole Slatter for their assistance and support in putting this project together. I would also like to thank Claire Bushby and the staff and volunteers at Spectrum Project Space, as well as Lydia Trethewey and Eva Fernandez. And lastly to DI Prout and Andrew Harman for their love and support.

#### Cover Image:

Fiona Harman

The Shallows

Oil on canvas

80 x 100 cm

Image: Eva Fernandez

## Submerged: Fiona Harman's Display Homes By Lydia Trethewey

Recently as I was idly scrolling through pictures on the internet I came across some photographs of an empty hotel, gutted and stripped back to a series of flat white surfaces. The caption claimed that it's available for hire to re-enact scenes from horror movies: the lights are set to flicker on and off as actors dressed as zombies chase you through the maze of featureless rooms. Whether or not this is true or just another instance of internet embellishment, I found the images instantly fascinating: a building that presumably once housed the sort of pampered luxuries characteristic of hotels, now emptied and flattened into a repetitive echoing of uniform spaces. The truly disconcerting part though, the thing that shatters any illusion of this empty hotel as a modernist reverie on built forms or industrial textures, that infuses it with discomfort and apprehension: all the rooms are filled waist deep with water.

When I first saw Fiona Harman's paintings, the uneasy existence of the suburban model home as an entity that exerts both attraction and repulsion was immediately apparent. I was simultaneously drawn in to the perfect spaces and smooth surfaces, and repelled by the abject emptiness of it, the artificiality that seems to grow and consume. Her paintings address a new kind of built environment that finds its genesis through the immaculate facades of the display home, the menacing undertones of a plastic promise of paradise. Looking at the paintings in *Paradise Point* I am reminded of the empty hotel, and I realise that the thing which destabilises the paintings from simple reflections on aspiration, misgiving and suburbia is that these unlivable buildings are partially submerged.

Harman's water is not buoyant. The all too perfect turquoise sheen of backyard swimming pools, shimmering in the Summer sun, seeps insidiously into the vacant spaces. This water speaks to sinking rather than swimming, a slow descent through the water with no way to tell how far down the bottom is. Perhaps it is the wish for the Great Australian Dream gone awry, the pool into which the promise of paradise slowly disappears. Yet it

is not so straightforwardly metaphorical; the water is inviting even as it is disconcerting, exerting a visceral response that cannot be easily contained into a simple duality. It is not just a matter of building aspirational dreams on the weightless foundation of water. The paintings evoke a phenomenal response, a palpable unease and confusion of sinking and floating.

The surface of the water is unstable, reflecting shallowly in some places only to give way to an indeterminate suggestion of depth. The flat surfaces of the unlivable houses are the only things which seem to touch these reflections: facades and rectilinear conformity repeated through the water ad infinitum. Herein lies the paradox: in Harman's paintings of display homes, artificiality runs deep. Depth is not contrasted with superficiality, but shown to be its inseparable pair. Through this realisation *Paradise Point* generates discomfort. The promise of paradise is one of weightlessness, anonymity: disappearing.

The image of the empty hotel that I saw online now exists only in my head- try as I might none of my subsequent searches have managed to conjure it again. Harman's paintings inhabit my mind in a similar way; they reach out beyond the flatness of the depicted surfaces, the flat reality of the painted surface, and fill me with disquiet. The known unreality in the promises of an unlivable space inform an anachronistic nostalgia, remembering fondly things that might happen. Falseness and vacancy pivot unbidden into depth and disappearance. The paintings in *Paradise Point* are full of the devastating reality of paradoxes: deep artificiality, false paradise, tangible soullessness. These paradoxes are played out through submerged buildings. Absence has a presence here, leaving only a handful of words that cannot really describe the phenomena: disappearing, sinking, floating, desire and its undoing, promise, paradise, escape. The paintings thwart my attempts to contain them: I feel as if I am wading towards them waist deep in water.

This publication supports the exhibition: Paradise Point

Spectrum Project Space

10 July - 23 July 2015

Spectrum Project Space

Building 3.191, Edith Cowan University

2 Bradford St, Mount Lawley

Western Australia 6050

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Website: <http://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/communications-and-arts/spectrum-project-space>

Cover Image:

Fiona Harman

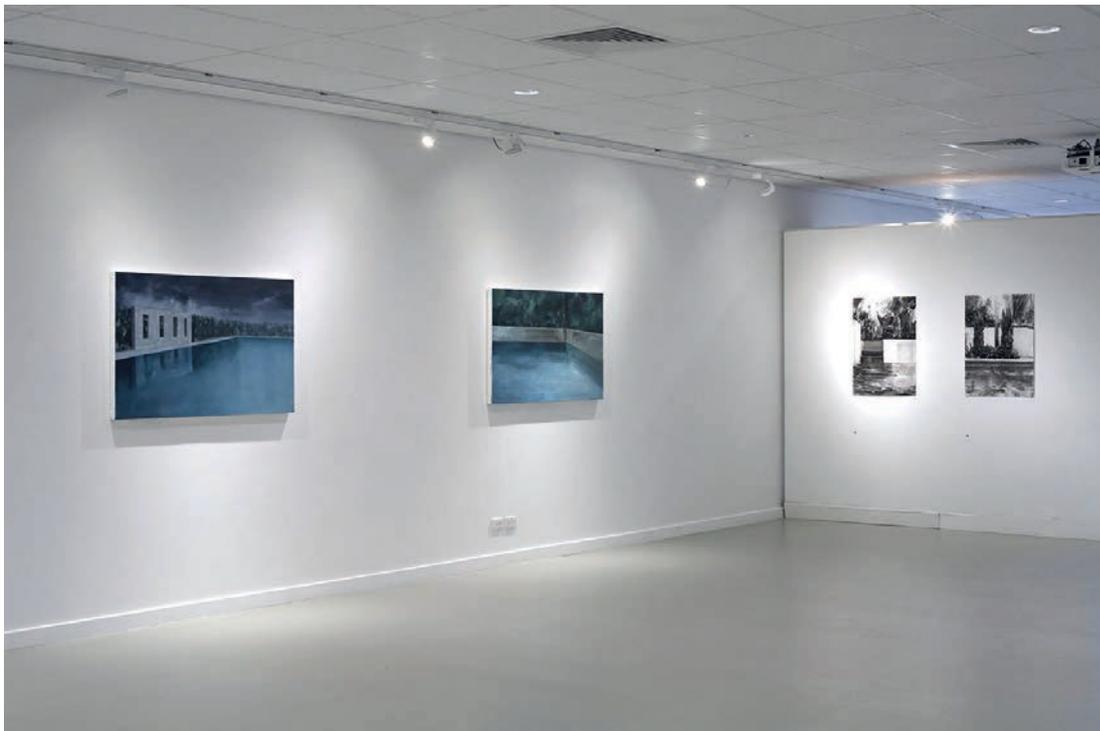
Veil

Oil on canvas

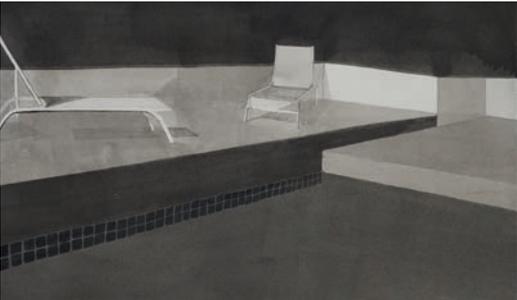
80 x 100cm

Image: Eva Fernandez





Images from *Paradise Point*, Spectrum Project Space, 2015.



Images from *Paradise Point*, Spectrum Project Space, 2015.

A photograph of a gallery interior. The background shows a white wall and a doorway leading to another room. Overlaid on the image is a white rectangular box containing text. The text is centered and reads: "STRUCTURALLY SOUND", followed by "Exhibition of work exploring experiences and perceptions of built spaces by Fiona Harman and Luke Aleksandrow.", "Opening 5th June 6pm - 8pm", "Gallery hours 6th June - 14th June 10am - 4pm, daily.", and "Moore's Building Contemporary Art Gallery 46 Henry st, Fremantle, WA.".

**STRUCTURALLY  
SOUND**

Exhibition of work exploring experiences and perceptions of built spaces by Fiona Harman and Luke Aleksandrow.

Opening 5th June 6pm - 8pm  
Gallery hours 6th June - 14th June 10am - 4pm, daily.

**Moore's Building Contemporary Art Gallery**  
46 Henry st, Fremantle, WA.

## STRUCTURALLY SOUND

FIONA HARMAN

LUKE ALEKSANDROW

Model houses and display homes are a bit fucked in the sense that their shiny, manicured 'unsullied-ness' is both repulsive and alluring. Disgusting and attractive. No one wants to openly admit that they have fallen in love with a display home, seduced by the crisp lawn that no one has ever stepped foot on, or the fresh pool that no one has ever peed in. No one wants to admit that the utterly transparent stage-like façade of the display home is in anyway appealing – it is for young professionals, or middle class newly weds. Not for me. I can see through all that bullshit.

But deep down, despite being able to detect the falseness of the display home, I think that we all still in some way revel in obliging and playing along with the charade. We can see ourselves entertaining in the entertainment area. Ultimately we are attracted to the promise of a fresh start; a stainless rug and a stainless steel fridge. One might expect that this is Fiona Harman's position on the model house; her paintings evidence both a disgruntled-ness and a deep fascination with the subject. The grey and brooding four-by-two double garage is foregrounded by a bottomless swimming pool of other-worldly turquoise. Such is the paradoxical nature of the display home, it is grossly perfect and nice and beautiful, and we can be critical of these things on the surface, but it is also representative of another life, a beautiful life you might have had if you worked harder and saved better.

Silence, as a concept and as an experience, might be thought of as equally multi-pronged. It's hard to think about silence without conjuring a visual of a specific place or circumstance. An at-ease, tranquil silence might be associated with the garden, the meadow or with meditation. A solemn, mournful silence might belong to the hospital, the church, the edge of the bed. Silence is in this sense provisional, something that emerges as opposed to something that *is*. The experience of silence is bound, governed and conditioned by locale. Luke Aleksandrow's work embodies this idea, drawing out silence from various sites and spaces. His works bring silence into plain view, and provides opportunities to engage in that which we 'often hear but rarely listen to.'<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the experience of silence is akin to the model house (or maybe it isn't), both might be thought of as subject to an impending disruption – something to interrupt the nothingness.

Structurally Sound, then, is held together by Aleksandrow and Harman's shared affectation for de-familiarising the familiar. Both take as their point of departure from constructs and concepts that are ever-present and common to everyday life. By mining the uncanny and the bizarre and the paradoxical conditions of these constructs, these artists' works provide new ways of seeing – and hearing, what is already there.

David Attwood

**LUKE ALEKSANDROW** is currently based in Perth, Western Australia. His art practice investigates the experience of unheard silences through video and sound installations. After graduating with a First Class Honours in Art at Curtin University, Aleksandrow went on to complete a Masters in Applied Art and Design at Curtin University in 2013. He has recently returned from a residency at Creata Rome, Rome, Italy and prior to that, completed a 6-month residency at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 2014. He has just been accepted for a 2-month residency in Finland at Arteless in November 2015.

**FIONA HARMAN** is a Perth based artist whose practice investigates real and imagined experiences of suburbia through representations of architectural motifs in painting. She received a First Class Honours in Art at Curtin University in 2012, where she is currently a PhD. Candidate in the Department of Architecture and Interior Architecture, and works as a Sessional Academic in the School of Art and Design. Harman finished a 6-month residency at the Fremantle Arts Centre in 2014, and will have her first solo exhibition *Paradise Point*, opening on the 10<sup>th</sup> July at Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University, Mt. Lawley.

**DAVID ATTWOOD** is an artist based in Perth, Western Australia. His multidisciplinary practice takes an iconoclastic approach to contemporary Australian folklore, pop-culture and urban mythology. In 2011 Attwood was awarded a First Class Honours degree in Art from Curtin University, where he is currently a PhD. candidate and Sessional Academic. Recent solo exhibitions include *Suburban Similes*, Firstdraft, Sydney, NSW and *Green and Gold*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle WA. His work has been acquired by the John Curtin Gallery and the City of Bunbury, as well as numerous private collections.





Images from *Structurally Sound*, Moores Building, 2015.



# STILL LIFE

**MUNDARING ARTS CENTRE**  
Presents  
**Still Life**  
Extraordinary. Everyday.  
21 Aug – 27 Sep 2015

<p><b>Elio Markez-Yong</b></p> <p>“This exhibition is a celebration of the artist’s work, showcasing his versatility in the use of various media and techniques. The exhibition is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality.”</p>	<p><b>Anthony Mula</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Iron Rhodes</b></p> <p>Iron Rhodes is a contemporary artist whose work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Sharon Eddy</b></p> <p>All is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Kathie Sadler</b></p> <p>This exhibition is a celebration of the artist’s work, showcasing his versatility in the use of various media and techniques. The exhibition is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality.</p>	<p><b>Al Sattopom</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>
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**Curator’s Introduction**  
 It is hard to believe that the world is so full of extraordinary people. It is hard to believe that there are so many people who are so talented, so creative, and so full of life. It is hard to believe that there are so many people who are so kind, so generous, and so full of love. It is hard to believe that there are so many people who are so brave, so courageous, and so full of hope. It is hard to believe that there are so many people who are so strong, so resilient, and so full of faith. It is hard to believe that there are so many people who are so beautiful, so graceful, and so full of joy. It is hard to believe that there are so many people who are so wonderful, so amazing, and so full of life. It is hard to believe that there are so many people who are so extraordinary, so extraordinary, and so full of life.

**Isabelle Matthews**  
 Director  
 www.mundaringartscentre.com.au  
 08 9422 1111

**Robyn Cough**  
 Curator  
 www.mundaringartscentre.com.au  
 08 9422 1111

**Published by Mundaring Arts Centre**  
 August 2015  
 Design: Sarah-Jane  
 08 9422 1111

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<p><b>Ned Adams</b></p> <p>It is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Katherine Asha</b> All About it! Make it!</p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Megan Chidley</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Adam Cuckshank</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Elichae Doney</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Eve Fernandes</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Jack Flanagan</b> The Culture Project</p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Susan Rowell</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Fenelope Parsons</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Riona Harmon</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Kerion Ingram</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>	<p><b>Brendan Jurich</b></p> <p>The artist’s work is a testament to his artistic vision and his ability to create compelling and thought-provoking works that challenge the viewer’s perception of reality. His use of mixed media and techniques is a testament to his artistic versatility and his ability to create works that are both visually striking and intellectually stimulating.</p>
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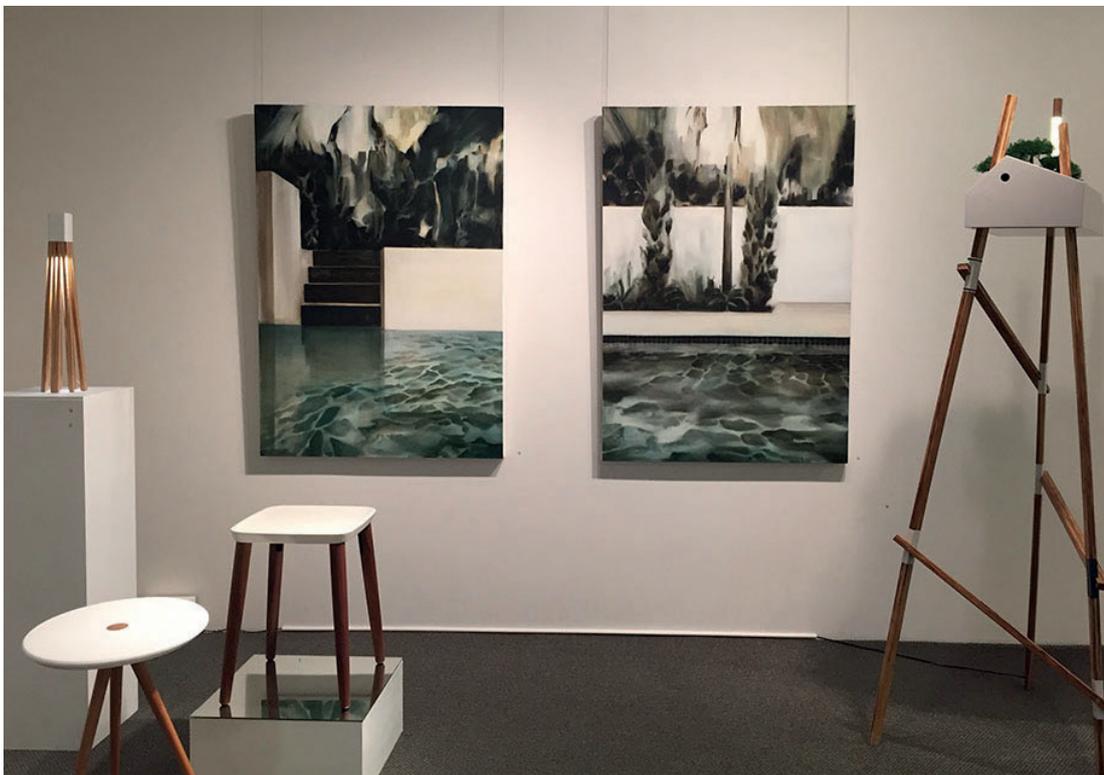


Image from *Still Life: extraordinary, everyday, 2015*.

# KURB GALLERY PRESENTS: PHASE

TANISHA BURTTYK  
ZOE CHONG-SENG  
DI CUBITT  
FIONA HARMAN  
JESSICA WILKES

CURATED BY FIONA HARMAN

JULY 6 – 11 2014



Phase brings together five artists that have studied and worked together at Curtin University. While their individual practices are quite different, the role of planning, preparing and documenting the progression of their work is the central to their studio research, and is the main theme of this exhibition.

Phase seeks to open up discussion and understandings about ways artist's work to create a finished object that then gets shown in a gallery. While still selective, the work shown is not highly polished and resolved, but rather more candid and intimate, encouraging the viewer to explore and experience a cross-section of the artists' thought processes and ideas.

*'There do not exist things made, but only things in the making, not states that remain fixed, but only states in a process of change.'* Henri Bergson

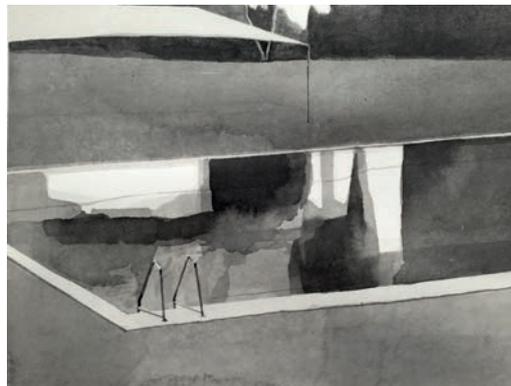
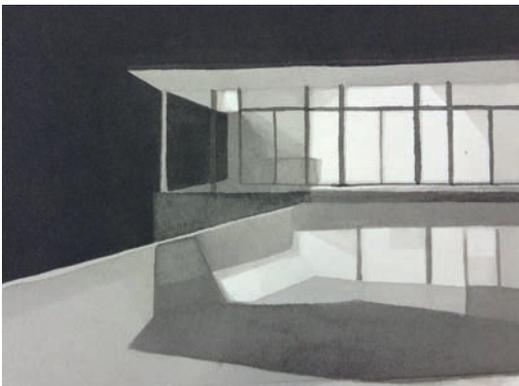
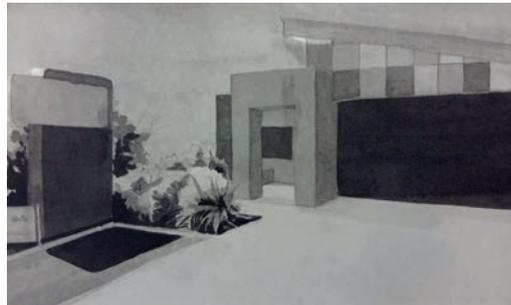
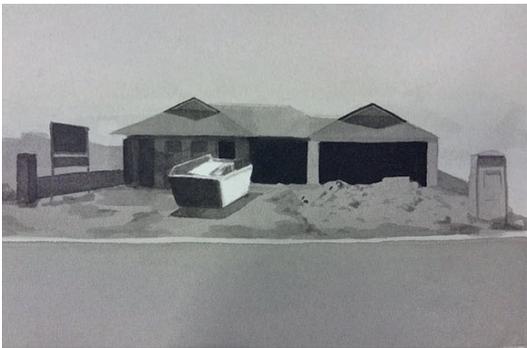
Fiona Harman's charcoal preparatory drawings and explorative oil paintings are used in the planning of artworks, and continue alongside the development of a finished painting. These sketches are used to develop sensitivities in her paintings that come from experimentation and intuitive, material driven decision-making.

Harman takes the motif of the 'display home' as her starting point to explore real and imagined experiences of suburbia, questioning the ideal of a model home and what it can reveal about wider socio-cultural values and Australian identity. The oil paint sketches take specific elements of this motif, such as the perfectly manicured garden, the swimming pool, or the façade and investigate ways representations through painting and drawing can suggest other experiences of suburbia that recall both the desire, aspiration and promise bound up in real estate advertising, as well as personal narratives and memories of home.





Studio research and works in progress, 2013–2016.



Studio research: ink and pencil drawings, 2013–2016.



Studio research and testing, 2013–2016.



