

# *Mea Culpa*

Emily Hartley-Skudder / Rosa Scott / Sophie Scott /  
Julia Croucher / Adrienne Millwood / Matt Akehurst

{ Suite }

G A L L E R Y

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# *Mea Culpa*

The exhibition title, *Mea Culpa*, has become a sort of middle-brow cliché masquerading as highbrow apology – a flashy and pretentious way of apologising, often insincerely. It originates from a prayer of confession, the Confiteor (“I confess”) in the Latin Mass of the Roman Catholic Church and dates to around AD 1100: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea máxima culpa*, “through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault”. While the making of art is frequently an almost autonomous, organic compulsion for practitioners, an expelled part of the body like a secretion, is it a compulsion that artists occasionally feel they must apologise for? Do contemporary painters feel obliged to apologise for being interested in unfashionable figuration? Are they apologising for teaming old with new and high with low? Perhaps there is some unconscious anxiety at work here, and perhaps it manifests itself in the need for ironic distance that Irish writer James Joyce pioneered in order to put as much philosophical space between author and narrator as possible, regardless of how many references to autobiography there might be. In art it sort of ghosts around in modernist abstraction, but in contemporary postmodern art ironic distance becomes the subject of art itself. Of course there are many different ways to go about creating and depicting that ironic distance and can be found in the work of these graduates from the University of Canterbury’s School of Fine Arts in Christchurch.

Emily Hartley-Skudder creates miniature dollhouse-like domestic dioramas and tableaux, and then paints them as though they were at ordinary scale. The little *Thunderbirds*-esque distortions create the *unheimlich* in her pitch-perfect, soft-focus canvasses. It is those intervening steps of the process that create the frisson of ironic distance. Hartley-Skudder strikes me as what author Beverley Nichols in his 1956 gardening autobiography *Sunlight on the Lawn*, calls a ‘shrinker’: “Certainly on this occasion confronted by



Emily Hartley- Skudder, *Vanitas with Candlestick and Yellow Skull*, Oil on Canvas, 840 x 560 mm, 2012

this wonderful dollhouse... I was glad to be a shrinker ... because in a very few moments I had shrunk enough to step inside and set foot in the hall". Elsewhere in the book there are shades of the hallucinogenic *Alice in Wonderland*, when writing of his beloved garden: "there are drawbacks to being a shrinker in the garden of course ... there is always the danger of being stunned by a dewdrop and in wet weather one is apt to sink too deeply into the moss". There is a sweetness to these dollhouse *memento mori* that could either be taken as deliberately twee and intentionally cloying, or as unconsciously feminine, nostalgic for childhood and playful, but ultimately saved by the perversity of the variations and disparities of scale and anti-nostalgic palette. Baudrillard's simulacra is realised. It is a little like the miniatures that the Martian colonists project their escapist hallucinations onto in Philip K. Dick's 1965 novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

Rosa Scott's paintings find their ironic distance in their interplay of acidly bright but ambiguous form and deep, atmospheric ground and background. They might be twilight, perspectively vague Romantic landscapes with all the tricks of the Picturesque and the Sublime, or they may be abstracts. Personally my eye reads them as landscapes, and once the brain has resolutely accepted this, the art-historical associations it furnishes are legion – Turner, Moreau, Whistler, Arnold Böcklin and Max Ernst as pastiched by an Anselm Kiefer, or some cynical Rolf Harris-school hack poised with brushes like mops in a painting sweatshop who is really an undiscovered genius. In these epically theatrical scapes, the ambivalent absence of humans and nature is pronounced, as if embracing a defensiveness about Romanticism and a wariness of human violence against the passive world. This is quite a development from earlier work that was genuinely abstract, suggestive of sour yellow and orange fireworks in a Whistler nocturne, suddenly rendered concrete by the small detail of a mournful looking hound: a David Lynch-esque sentimental punctum in an otherwise irrational abstract setting. The dogs aren't present in these works, the role being taken over by the landscape, and now ambient rather than punctum.



Rosa Scott, *Seek*, Oil on Board, 300 x 276 mm, 2011

Sophie Scott, Rosa Scott's sister, plays with the positive and negative in blown-up black and white photographic prints of banal and real world landscapes, preferably with chunky geometric structures, cutting out selected shapes to create complexly lacy and almost abstract visions. In this case there are two variations on the image of a container ship – one rendered tonally positive by having all of the dark bits cut out of it, and one made tonally dark by only having black parts removed. The presence of a unifying stain of white and black paint on the images respectively, is not only unifying, but suggests that the cut-outs have been used as stencils elsewhere. Scott often uses stencils made like these from photographically sourced images to make abstract paintings on found wooden objects and plywood. Stencils are suggestive of street artists like Banksy, but also the use of mechanical production seen in the work of Bernard Frize and others, provide a creative constraint, a reduction, an economy of means like the forms of poetry and dance. The stencils, a by-product of process, become works in their own right, though originally not intentionally. Each layer is one step removed from the original image and reveals how carefully and thoroughly the artist analyses the source image and how it can be manipulated and transformed in the quidditic real world rather than the usual virtual digital metamorphoses.

Julia Croucher's delicate pink watercolour nudes find their ironic distance in a kind of cartoonish sensuality, the cherry-red nipples for example – that either tames eroticism by hiding it in semi-abstractness, or in fact makes something abstract like a flesh-coloured Rorschach blot become sexual with the calculated inclusion of visual shorthand of clues and signifiers. The gender of these Matisse-like beings is ambiguous and indeterminate, more female than male and therefore more hermaphroditic than androgynous. They are pared back to the formal basics of what is required to maintain a frisson. The stain-like qualities of the watercolour hint at bodily fluids and the abject, and the fleeting ephemerality of life. In her day job, Croucher is a tattoo artist, and she applies similar ornamental detailing by means of stencils and carbon paper transfer; hard counterpointing soft, definite



Sophie Scott, *Ghost Ship 1*, Oil on Paper, 297 x 210 mm  
(unframed), 2011





Julia Croucher, *Figure Study 6*, Watercolour on Paper, 760 x 560 mm (unframed), 2011

balancing the ethereal. There is also a Pop art quality to them, by way of early Andy Warhol's perky commercial drawings, and faint allusions to Egon Schiele's sullenly smouldering perversity.

Adrienne Millwood's combinations of faded photographic prints barely recognisable beneath obscuring washes and biomorphic blobs of paint, find their ironic distance in taking some very banal found imagery and then erasing and obscuring it with paint. The cheap looking images, apparently printed from family snapshots or advertising stock in a palette usually associated with the grainy, warmly yellowed and faded photographs taken with Kodak's 110 film in the 1970s, carry certain nostalgic associations. These are collaged together or sometimes arranged in grids. They look distressed or stained over, and form the ground for a surreal ecology of abstract organic forms in various muddy or faded institutional pastels. The forms jostle and overlap, sometimes conforming to the contours of the photographic image beneath them and at other times obscuring it completely. The result is somewhat dreamlike. On the one hand, if we were to treat this as a window, we might attribute narrative characteristics found in the work of Mark Braunias or Rob McLeod. If we consider the painting a surface to be defaced and over-layered with formal and decorative feints, one could easily make comparisons to Sigmar Polke, and to a lesser extent Gerhard Richter. Like Polke and Richter, Millwood questions the apparent truth, validity, ownership, authenticity and purpose of the images she appropriates.

Matt Akehurst is something of an anomaly being the only male and 3D artist included. Akehurst's bulbous blobs are playfully ironic and fondly nostalgic homage to the 'serious' biomorphic sculptors of high modernism. The objects have their plinths and their mock seriousness, but resemble more a cartoonist's shorthand for "modern art", half remembered from Moore, Hepworth, Arp and Noguchi. Indeed, they more closely resemble the personable amorphous Shmoo creature created by Al Capp in 1948 for his comic strip *L'il Abner*, or the awkward hobby sculptures by stepmother



Adrienne Millwood, *Tracksuit*, Oil on photo-releases on canvas, 600 x 600 mm, 2011



Matt Akehurst, *OBJECT 15*, Polystyrene, Plaster, Builders filler, Paint,  
(Size of vitrine) 270 x 200 x 350 mm (ht), 2012

Delia (played by Catherine O'Hara) in the 1988 Tim Burton movie *Beetlejuice* – especially when said sculptures are spectrally animated. So, in a sense, the impulse at work here is more Romantic than purist modernist. These are characterful caricatures rather than austere sculptural entities. They beg for our affection and pity rather than our transcendent absorption. White as ghosts (clinical, minimalist, shiny modernist white), it is as if we have intruded upon them mid-metamorphosis between shapes. They seem to be trying to exude orifices with which to either tell us something or attack us with – do they do it for themselves or on behalf of the artist? Biomorphism, in the first instance invokes a predilection for indefinite and organic forms, with particular reference to those found in nature and biology to realise and articulate the vital life-force needed to liberate art from the rules and cages of technocratic civilisation. This, I think, does not strictly apply to Akehurst's sculptures. Their bulging, curved and rounded shapes, like biomorphism, suggest the ability of the individual determined artistic imagination to transcend the everyday world - or at least the received history of modernist art.

Mea Culpa brings together a diverse range of skilled and talented artists with varied approaches to the problem of how to make art in the twenty-first century. They have nothing to apologise for.

- Andrew Paul Wood

# List of works

## Emily Hartley-Skudder

*Vanitas with Candlestick and Yellow Skull*, Oil on Canvas, 840 x 560 mm, 2012

*May Night in a Niche*, Oil on Canvas, 840 x 560 mm, 2012

## Rosa Scott

*Seek*, Oil on Board, 300 x 276 mm, 2011

*Seeker*, Oil on Board, 600 x 310 mm, 2011-12

## Sophie Scott

*Ghost Ship 1*, Oil on Paper, 297 x 210 mm (unframed), 2011

*Ghost Ship 2*, Oil on Paper, 297 x 210 mm (unframed), 2011

## Julia Croucher

*Figure Study 6*, Watercolour on Paper, 760 x 560 mm (unframed), 2011

*Figure Study 9*, Watercolour on Paper, 760 x 560 mm (unframed), 2011

## Adrienne Millwood

*Tracksuit*, Oil on photo-releases on canvas, 600 x 600 mm, 2011

*Slide*, Oil on photo-releases on canvas, 600 x 600 mm, 2012

*Pool*, Oil on photo-releases on canvas, 600 x 600 mm, 2011

## Matt Akehurst

*OBJECT 15*, Polystyrene, Plaster, Builders filler, Paint, (Size of vitrine) 270 x 200 x 350 mm (ht), 2012

*OBJECT 16*, Polystyrene, Plaster, Builders filler, Paint, (Size of vitrine) 310 x 200 x 500 mm (ht), 2012

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