

Emily Hartley-Skudder

Showhome

A CHRISTCHURCH ART GALLERY OUTER SPACES PROJECT



A home as unique as you are



Vanity of vanities

In a clear glass dish on a polished coffee table, two glossy green pears nestle side by side, their generous curves tapering gracefully to slender necks and stems. It's a harmonious sight; one that, at first glance, might seem to have come straight out of a house styling manual, just after the tips about de-cluttering your bench-tops and ensuring the kitchen always smells like freshly baked bread. Just as we begin to surrender to the fantasy, however, a series of anomalies emerges to puncture and undermine it. Surely those pears are slightly too glossy, their shape too regular, their colour uncannily uniform and intense? Their very flawlessness becomes a distraction. Less fruit than archetypes, they seem instead like someone's ideal of what a pear should be – and, come to think of it, isn't that bowl a bit snug? Once these first cracks appear, the doubts come flooding in. Other objects on the table – a gold goblet, a purple shell – seem either portentously symbolic or weirdly random. The relative scale of everything is just a little off, the table too small, the shadows strangely long, even the sharp focus that first brought the pears to our attention a touch unnatural.

In the space of moments, we are shifted from an appreciation of this domestic idyll to a discomfoting awareness. Which, as it happens, is exactly where Emily Hartley-Skudder wants us. In her eerily precise paintings and arrangements, it's the delicate art of getting the little things wrong that renders her works so deliciously right.



Family and Dining (Coffee Table with Bottles and Pears) 2012. Oil on canvas

Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?



In Christchurch Art Gallery's latest Outer Space exhibition, Hartley-Skudder infiltrates the highly choreographed interior of a furnished showhome in Christchurch's Wigram Skies development, replacing its scrupulously neutral wall art with a site-specific series of still life paintings and found object miniatures. Although her work is often described in terms of realism, the method she has used here deliberately undermines any claims to authenticity. After constructing a miniature tableau of domestic objects to fit the 'theme' of each room from a vast selection of found miniatures and toys, she then lights and photographs it, and finally makes a painting based on the photograph. It's a process that prioritises translation,



Media Lounge (Still Life with Citrus and Grapes) 2013. Oil on canvas

transferral and re-contextualisation; each degree of separation both diluting and complicating the physical truth of the original subject. The fact that her photographs are likely to be seen as less 'original' than the paintings that copy them is an irony Hartley-Skudder enjoys and exploits – and by starting with objects that are already ersatz representations, she ensures that the more 'realistically' she paints, the less 'real' her works will appear to viewers. The correlation between each work and its showhome setting leads to a strangely disorientating doubling effect, as a painting of a shopping basket moonlighting as an oversized fridge ornament reproduces the groceries that might be stored inside, while the 'fake' painted (plastic) pears overlook 'real' (artificial) pears in a tall glass vase on the table above.

As is immediately apparent, Hartley-Skudder's engagement with traditional still life painting is both ironic and celebratory. In the exhibition's most direct allusion to the genre, *Media Lounge (Still Life with Citrus and Grapes)*, she reframes the many-textured opulence of a classic Dutch *pronk* (or 'showy') still life via the makeshift vocabulary of plastic toys. Many instantly recognisable aspects of the convention are present: the vase of flowers, the ubiquitous glistening grapes, the orange peel ready to fall to the ground below, even a caterpillar and a hovering dragonfly with diaphanous wings. All are acutely observed and painted, and combined with the glowing light and velvety atmosphere, the composition would reside comfortably

within the usual conventions of the genre were it not for the fact that most of the surfaces Hartley-Skudder has so faithfully reproduced are synthetic rather than organic, and that her models are inanimate representations of the real thing. Hartley-Skudder's reimagined still lifes refer not only to the sensibilities of the genre, but to its politics. The stigma that surrounded still life paintings even at the apex of the tradition in seventeenth-century Holland, was largely due to their concentration on domestic subjects rather than historical or religious themes, and their function as decorative objects in private homes. At that time in Holland, where the growing power and wealth of an increasingly urbanised society encouraged the mass production of genre paintings, Samuel van Hoogstraeten, in his *Introduction to the Academy of Painting* of 1678, considered it necessary to remind still life painters that they were merely 'the ordinary soldiers in the army of art'.¹ As Hartley-Skudder is only too aware, there are obvious parallels with contemporary art culture in which artists who stray too close to the decorative, or err on the side of commercialism, face similar castigation. In *Showhome* she deliberately tests out this ground, but you can't help feeling that she must take a degree of pleasure from the knowledge that the very human desire to see our everyday lives reflected back at us through art – albeit in flattering and glamorous arrangements – is as critically unfashionable, and as wildly popular with the general public, as it ever has been.

Hartley-Skudder likens the primed and styled set-piece of the showhome to 'a fully realised, life-sized dollhouse',² its every detail designed to communicate an idealised, 'perfected' impression of homeliness. From the on-trend furnishings and paint finishes to ornaments in the ensuite bathroom, no facet is left unconsidered. Like casinos, showhomes shut out reality's harsh light, hermetically sealing us in serene, immaculate fantasy worlds powered by our dreams and aspirations and unspoiled by petty anxieties, much less moody spouses or messy children. Inescapably generic, but judiciously personalised, they're designed to appeal to the individual ('a home as unique as you are') while not alienating prospective buyers with extraneous or ill-judged details. Accompanying marketing materials make extravagant claims about style and domestic convenience, recalling the triumphant consumerism invoked by Richard Hamilton's celebrated pop art collage of 1956, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (For the record, the answer to that statement, which Hamilton lifted out of an advertisement in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, read: 'Open planning of course – and a bold use of color.')

In this setting, Hartley-Skudder's paintings and miniatures are presented as the aspirational props for a perfect future, their saccharine colours and OTT delivery a perfect match for the breathless promotional wish fulfilment. Like the gender-specific groupings on greeting card shelves (where champagne,

high heeled shoes and cupcakes jostle against sailboats, footballs and beer), she incorporates items that seem to point obediently towards the projected uses of each space as defined in the showhome's meticulously detailed floorplan: toiletries and a rubber duck for the bathroom, fresh vegetables and cooking implements for the kitchen. Their found object origins, however, give them a strangely haphazard quality that lends the otherwise twee compositions an awkward, unsettling air. In principle, flowers, a telephone, a water glass and an ornament would seem suitable accoutrements for a bedside table, but the examples presented in *Master Bedroom (Ornate Nightstand with Telephone and Daisies)* are plainly not fit for purpose. It's as though they have been chosen for looks rather than function by a child who is yet to fully grasp the fine nuances of home décor.

From our homes and clothes to our household appliances and children's toys, our possessions reveal us. Even the accessories sold with dolls morph to reflect changing societal values and mores, as Hartley-Skudder has discovered. Collecting miniatures to use in her works, she purchased the same kinds of Sylvanian Families sets she cherished as a child, and was intrigued to find that a modestly titled 'Dressing Table' now featured a tiny vanity/makeup display counter. In *Showhome*, her paintings in the rooms designated for children push conservative gender stereotypes to the point of satire – in the boy's room, a sword, motorbike and baseball bat and glove speak of action and



Master Bedroom (Ornate Nightstand with Telephone and Daisies) 2012-13.
Oil on canvas

physicality, while in the girl's, a mirror, rose, high-heeled shoe and mismatched padlock and key suggest a narrative dominated by appearances, romance and secrecy. You could certainly be forgiven for reading them as a good-humoured, if pointed, reminder about how prescriptive and oppressive life in the perfect family might be.

Once upon a time, but not so far away, I worked near a café that kept a large bell-jar on its counter. Inside was a porcelain cake-stand, on which rested a small selection of baked goods: a scone, a muffin, a slice of gateau. Queuing at the counter,



*A true home: four bedrooms
with computer nook, two bathrooms
and a walk in pantry, and the
decorating is already done for you.*



A home as unique as you are

customers often pointed them out, saying ‘I’ll have one of those, please’, only to be told that the items in the bell-jar were for ‘display purposes only’ These stunt muffins, as I came to think of them, not only looked better than the real thing, but frequently the real thing didn’t even exist. Often, there were no muffins available, and the immaculate examples in the bell-jar existed only as an appealing, but unattainable, ideal. Until, of course, the café closed down, its customers perhaps ultimately preferring a slightly more pragmatic relationship with their food.

A fascination with this idea of the perfected artificial, and its ultimate failure to live up to its promises, pervades the works in **Showhome**. *Guest Room (Window Seat with Teacup, Cake and Book)* is the very picture of serene tranquillity, the objects chosen and arranged to suggest a quiet reverie. As we look more closely, however, the details begin to jar, and the painting takes on a disconcerting resonance. The cup sits just a little off the centre of its saucer. The book, with its stylised, unusable pages, hangs precariously over the edge of the seat. The world beyond the windows is dark and unknowable, and the slice of cake is strangely untouched. It’s like that moment in a fairytale when the villain approaches the heroine with a shiny red apple. *Careful*, we think, *nothing can really be that perfect*. Bursting with lusciously inedible food and unashamedly impractical utensils, the final surprise in Hartley-Skudder’s artfully constructed works is that, in all their lurid plastic glory,



Guest Room (Window Seat with Teacup, Cake and Book) 2012-13. Oil on calico

they nevertheless echo the moral warning implicit in the hourglasses and pocket watches that seventeenth-century still life artists sometimes slipped into their showpieces of conspicuous consumption. *Time is fleeting*, they seem to say. *Be careful what you wish for*.

Felicity Milburn

Curator, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

¹ Samuel van Hoogstraeten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderconst*, Rotterdam, 1678, p75.

² Emily Hartley-Skudder, email to the author, January 2013.



1. Master Bedroom (Ornate Nightstand with Telephone and Daisies) 2012-13. Oil on canvas



2. Ensuite (Yellow Flower Perfume Collection) 2012. Oil on calico



3. Fridge Ornament (Shopping Basket with Groceries) 2012. Oil on calico



4. Kitchen (Still Life with Vegetables and Spatula) 2012. Oil on canvas



5. Family and Dining (Coffee Table with Bottles and Pears) 2012. Oil on canvas



6. Family and Dining (Fireplace with Glasses, Horse and Candlestick) 2013. Oil on calico



7. Media Lounge (Still Life with Citrus and Grapes) 2013. Oil on canvas



8. Guest Room (Window Seat with Teacup, Cake and Book) 2012-13. Oil on calico



9. Boy's Room (Collection for Boys) 2013. Oil on calico



10. Bathroom (Cabinet with Toiletries and Rubber Duck) 2012. Oil on calico



11. Girl's Room (Dresser with Red Rose, Lock and Key) 2013. Oil on calico



Miniature Works

- 12. Ensuite Set 2013. Found objects
- 13. Boys' Collection 2013. Found objects
- 14. Tri-Colour Marine Wall Hanging Set 2013. Found objects

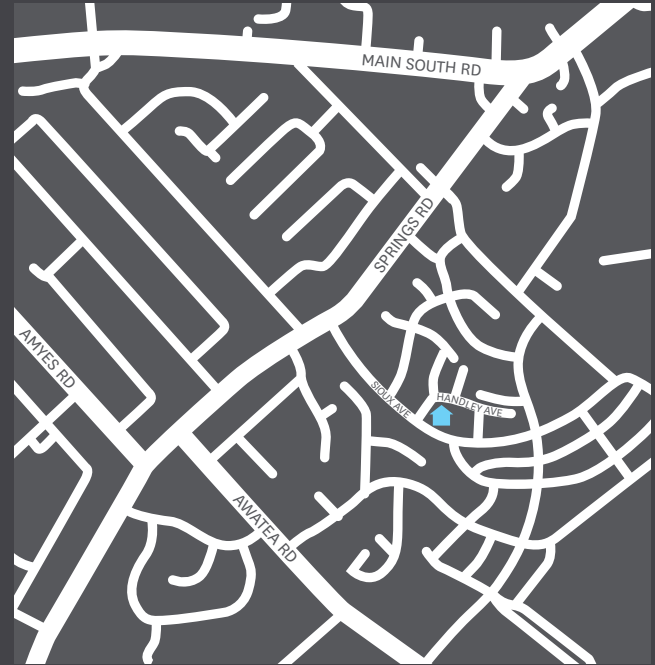
EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER: SHOWHOME

49 SIOUX AVENUE, WIGRAM SKIES
DEVELOPMENT, WIGRAM

27 FEBRUARY – 19 MARCH 2013
OPEN 12AM – 4PM TUESDAY TO SUNDAY
CLOSED MONDAYS / FREE ENTRY

SUPPORTED BY ORANGE HOMES

Cover image © Orange Homes



**CHRISTCHURCH
ART GALLERY
TE PUNA O
WAIWHETU
OUTER SPACES**
christchurchartgallery.org.nz

