



Still-Life & Real Estate

The Making of Emily Hartley-Skudder

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Few artists would admit to being content to wait for fortune to fall in their laps, the entrepreneurial spirit being almost as much of a badge of honour in the world of art as it is in commerce.

However, some individuals are clearly more proactive than others when it comes to making their own luck, especially those who count themselves among 'Gen Y', that age bracket known for its irrepressibility and refusal to take no for an answer. This must surely be the case with Ilam alumna Emily Hartley-Skudder, recently returned from her own 18-month personal 'residency' in Brooklyn, New York.

'Residency' is a word that appeals in a variety of ways due to connotations of real estate, transience, occupancy, studentship and paying your dues, all hallmarks of this artist's growing body of works that focus on the miniature.

Instead of Manhattan—rarely a viable option for a young artist starting out—it was Brooklyn that became Hartley-Skudder's temporary neighbourhood during this period. There, in an area synonymous with hipsters, rapidly gentrifying beyond their means, she worked two jobs to provide the wherewithal to make art for showing in local galleries, or sending back home to her dealer in New Zealand.

Contrary to the common fear that our creative talent, once allowed to leave our shores, is inevitably

lost, Hartley-Skudder bucked this trend, returning via Lake Rotoma to take up another, more mature 'residency' in Wellington.

It may be tempting to interpret her relocation from the 'Big Apple' to 'the coolest little capital in the world' as an exercise in downscaling, of retreat from the big time. However, that is not the impression gained when visiting her new upstairs studio at {Suite} Gallery on Wellington's Cuba Street—which positively dwarfs the Brooklyn space she once called home.

Not that spaciousness seems too much of a concern for this woman, whose taste is more towards the miniature—demonstrated by her eye for garishly hued dollhouses and the toy ephemera she collects and photographs as inspiration for her faux-commercial still-lives and tableaux.

As her double-barrelled name suggests, Auckland-born Hartley-Skudder easily slips between multiple, hands-on roles—be they collector, photographer, painter, even interior designer—sometimes all four. As a result, her works span all categories—from the realms of painting, photography and found-object installation, their common thread being a focus on still-life and real estate, as well as notions of authenticity and the 'real'. These media feature both separately, between and within shows as well as combined within single works. A painting may be the result of years of collection and accumulation

(opposite)
EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER *Morning Still Life with Citrus* 2016
Oil on linen, 155 x 230 mm.

(right) EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER
Composition with Whites and Stripes 2016
Oil on linen, 155 x 230 mm.

(below) EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER *Master Bedroom (Ornate
Nightstand with Telephone and Daisies)* 2012–13
Oil on canvas, 707 x 467 mm.

followed by careful arrangement, photography and then, only finally, translated into paint. Or she may choose to finish with a photograph, or the found object itself may be the end product. In this way, Hartley-Skudder takes snapshots of the various stages of the lifecycle of that hungriest of beasts, the product.

Clunky as such a term might seem when applied to the field of fine art, 'maker' is a far more appropriate way to describe this artist's approach than anything so hackneyed as the ubiquitous and overused 'curator'. Art director and/or realtor may also be suitable alternatives—the latter in particular, given the fact that housing, or the lack of it, has been a key theme throughout her recent development. For example, when seeking a gallery following graduation, the artist came across a show home on the outskirts of Christchurch. The eerie perfection of the new development, known as Wigram Skies, proved irresistible for her plans to make site-specific paintings matched to the decor. It would be a direct slap in the face to the sanctity of the austere gallery, not to mention deconstructing domestic space. It also cheekily harked back to a time when wealthy businesspeople ordered still-lifes as decoration for their Flemish houses (a practice still prevalent among owners of British country homes). Not only that, but with the continued closure of the Christchurch Art Gallery, the choice of such a location in which to show fitted snugly within the remit of the gallery's *Outer Spaces* programme, which used external sites to showcase local art.

Hartley-Skudder is a fan of the painterly 'tilt shift', that sometimes overused photographic trick whereby large scenes are made to seem small by blurring foreground and background to indicate a shortened depth of field. She is a director of worlds within worlds, employing blur and clarity to upend perspective and size. Obsessively accumulating, arranging, photographing and then format shifting yet again, through the act of painting, the tilt shift gains extra meanings, hinting at the many layers of depth beyond those evoked through visual deception alone. In this way, painting is just the tip of the curatorial iceberg.

Watching her preparations for the 2016 Auckland Art Fair, situated among her half-finished works, one gains insights into this young artist's methods and thinking. Photographs of various arrangements of miniature plastic items are stuck to the walls next to incomplete paintings; some are purpose-built, some life-size. All that is lacking in this scene are the source objects themselves, which Hartly-Skudder has yet to unpack after her recent relocation. You can almost



feel the weight of her collections straining somewhere at phantom seams. This being preparation for an art fair, of all things, it is of course important for her installation to exude a certain directorial 'vision' through which to differentiate itself. In this instance, in keeping with her paintings, there is to be a self-referential clear plastic shelf upon which to place her canvases, a physical manifestation of an item that often features in her work.

Among the new pieces here are *Composition with Whites and Stripes* (2016), in which shimmering, milk-white items of delicacy sit dangerously close to the lip of a mantelpiece laid with a crisp tablecloth. The resultant mood is of freshness, murkiness, danger, and fastidiousness—wet with fog, yet sharp enough to cut one to pieces, like mist on a mirror in an upmarket bathroom. These delicate items resonate with portents of their own destruction.





That is not to say a painting is always the end product, and nor is the process neatly tidied away and hidden in these works. In fact, Hartley-Skudder bares her process like a soul within her shows—it is integral to her approach. In her 2015 exhibition, *Happiness World*, paintings lined the walls, circling garish dollhouses supported by square white plinths. Reflecting the immersive Disneyland experience suggested by the title, even the gallery seating played a thematic role.

Happiness World may also have referenced something else—the artist's own happy place. Expunged of the modern gallery-goer's entrenched tendency to detect irony, the show could be seen as a confessional, a loving paean to all the things that have consumed the artist to date: I am here; this is me, so far.

The clean white walls of the gallery come as something of a change after some of Hartley-Skudder's recent work produced while conducting her Grand Tour of Brooklyn—in particular, a series of photographs entitled *I SPY*. These are a major departure in that they feature her characteristic domestic miniatures lost within the wilds of the big wide world, instead of enjoying their usual placement within quiet interiors. Like the travelling snapshots of a Lilliputian flaneur, these playful works involved shrunken household items—a vase here, upturned glass there—placed in surprising locales such as behind a grill, supported by a fire hydrant or amongst other trash. Reminiscent of a humorous internet meme from recent years, the series is a natural departure that inverts the artist's signature style whilst also mirroring her journey away from home. On a more

(left) Emily Hartley-Skudder's *Happiness World* at {Suite}, Wellington, 2015

(below left) EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER *Untitled* 2015
Colour photograph

(below right) EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER *Vanitas in Pastel* 2016
Oil on linen, 280 x 185 mm.

(opposite above)
EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER *Glass, Shadows and Vases* 2016
Oil on linen, 280 x 185 mm.

(opposite below)
EMILY HARTLEY-SKUDDER *Tea, Milk and Croissants* 2010
Oil on canvas, 700 x 485 mm.

material level, it reflects the harsh reality of seeking suitable, affordable accommodation in New York and surrounds.

While predicting an artist's trajectory from the tealeaves of the present is a popular pastime, a little time travel can also prove illuminating. Vaulting back six years to her paintings of 2010/11, there are clearly kernels of her current obsessions, in large oil format, before her fascination with the tiny began. Artificial domestic objects—plastic miniature milk cartons, cups and croissants—feature in the foreground, with a blurred van Gogh behind. There is a freshness to these works; you can sense her raw delight at encountering and playing with this strong idea long before it has had a chance to become a trope. The effect is modernist, with something of the feel of Michael Smither too; instead of the older artist's river stones, however, the subjects are found objects, mismatched accoutrements from a discarded toyhouse, perhaps. Though orderly in arrangement, there is a feeling not dissimilar to the Boschian hell evoked by the mismatched, unwanted, unloved Frankenstein toys of *Toy Story 3*. The works have the naive honesty of an art-school exercise, but also the eureka spark of future talent. As such, they are a glimpse into the chasm of hazard, a confession that the works we do see have been chosen from among the many that do not make it.

Contrast these with the site-specific pieces from *Showhome* (2013), and we see that over time a strong, layered, process-oriented style has clearly emerged, one that in lesser hands might teeter dangerously on the edge between art and gimmickry. One gets the uncomfortable feeling of having entered a new, uncanny region of the Venn diagram where commerce and art overlap, where the intended effect is far from





clear; does the irony belong with the artist or the viewer?

With Emily Hartley-Skudder, however, such tightrope walking does not undermine the integrity of the works. One is free to enjoy both her sophisticated

commentary on the place of decoration in art and the blurring of lines between aesthetics and marketing, as well as her adeptly arranged, photographed and painted modern-day still-lives for what they are.

