



Funny little objects

Emily Hartley-Skudder's sublime paintings of miniature objects capture the space between public and private, the real and the fake. Lucy Jackson talks to the artist.

Walking into Emily Hartley-Skudder's studio is like being transported into an imaginary world. It sits somewhere between *The Borrowers*, Polly Pocket and a dollhouse. It is bright, fun, and much of it in miniature. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of tiny objects sprawled across the room. There are rolls of marbled vintage wallpaper, pastel coloured sinks of yesteryear, a splattered paint tray. Empty oval frames hang on the wall and unfinished paintings lie beneath them. Almost camouflaged in this frenzy is the artist, plaid in a purple vintage dress, red cardigan and baby pink Reebok trainers.

Hartley-Skudder's studio won't surprise those familiar with her work; her paintings of miniature objects combined with retro backdrops match her studio, and her, to a tee. Hartley-Skudder began her collecting activities as a child with Sylvanian Families, the line of dollhouses and animal

figures created by a Japanese gaming company. From there, her fascination with the miniature grew and a collection formed, including anything from Barbie hairbrushes to dollhouses. Hartley-Skudder questions why people, herself included, like to collect tiny things. "I think it's a form of escapism and a need to be in control," she says. "They act as vehicles of fancy too, enticing us to project our fantasies onto them."

As a teenager, Hartley-Skudder photographed her collection on black and white film. Later, at the Ilam School of Fine Arts (2008-2012), she began to explore realistically painting these photographs. From here, she developed her process of collecting, assembling, photographing and then painting. The artist wanted to capture the uncanny feeling of looking at something fairly ordinary and then realising it is actually fake.

Opposite: Emily Hartley-Skudder, in her studio
Below: *Soft Staging*, 2017, installation view, *Every Day Lines*,
Hastings City Art Gallery

All artworks and photographs by Emily Hartley-Skudder

Hartley-Skudder's skill with painting the transparent object is sublime, often tricking the viewer into thinking it is in fact a photograph, leaving them wondering if the objects are real or fake. The process involves a kind of doubling, she says. When painting something fake she has to make it 'realistically fake' as 'a starting point, and then work hard to 'paint it realistically'. What's more, the miniature objects themselves aren't exactly accurate representations. As Hartley-Skudder says, picking up a tiny telephone, "Telephones don't look like this!" But, "You don't want it to look like a mistake. It has to be painted well."

Hartley-Skudder is meticulous at rendering, and there is something nostalgic and triggering about her paintings. On one hand, the paintings hark back to 17th-century Dutch still-life traditions, but the colours and objects might also remind you of a childhood in the 90s.

After largely exhibiting paintings as the 'final product' of her process, Hartley-Skudder began to give other aspects of her practice a more prominent role. She creates a space that is intertwined with elements of interior design, such as tiles, wallpaper, carpet and even furniture. These components then enter Hartley-Skudder's paintings as backdrops or details. The miniatures used in the paintings sit beside them. Her exhibition *Fourth Wall* (2017) at {Suite}, for instance,

had both a sense of fragmentation and a fourth dimension. Hartley-Skudder muddles the divides between public and private, artificial and real, throwing us into a nostalgic place in which we question what reality we are standing in.

Also in 2017, Hartley-Skudder created *Soft Staging* in *Everyday Lines* at Hastings City Art Gallery, her first public art installation. There Hartley-Skudder transformed a 3 x 4-metre gallery into an installation; the walls were painted, a wallpaper frieze added around the top, and carpet laid on the gallery tiles. Pseudo-dollhouse low-relief furniture sat against the walls with miniatures perched on top. Her peachy pink-toned paintings became the final element. Upon entering the space, visitors were in the domestic, within the gallery, and surrounded by the everyday – but the objects or spaces were not everyday in the gallery.

Hartley-Skudder's exploration of the interior – altering a gallery's appearance, and then using elements of interior design within the art that then becomes part of the interior design – evokes a doubling, enabling the space to become two-fold. Visitors are in a room within a room, both of which typically have different purposes. Both *Fourth Wall* and *Soft Staging* hinted at a fourth dimensionality to both the installation itself, the paintings and their boundaries, as well as the experience of the visitor.





Lemon-Lime Sweetheart (detail), 2018, mixed media, including oil on linen, 300 x 380mm (painting), 980 x 1925mm (wall), 980 x 455mm (floor). Courtesy of Jonathan Smart Gallery

This move into a more multi-dimensional space is becoming a regular occurrence in Hartley-Skudder's practice, although it has recently moved toward a slightly more refined version. Her latest series, *Blue Rinse*, at Jonathan Smart Gallery exhibits what Hartley-Skudder describes as "contained installations". *Blue Rinse* is made up of eight artworks. Each features a vintage sink and one of Hartley-Skudder's signature paintings, located above the sink where a mirror would normally be, fixed to tiled backdrops or splashbacks and with an aluminium trim.

As a key inspiration, the artist points to Robert Gober's retrospective exhibition at MoMA, *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor* (2014), which she saw when she was living in New York. The exhibition distorted aspects of furniture and everyday life, and challenged them to be considered outside of their mere function. This experience stayed with Hartley-Skudder, and she pondered over it, until she came across some sinks and started to formulate *Blue Rinse*. She acknowledges that there's also an inescapable connection to Duchamp's *Fountain* as well, but she has a different take on it, from a very feminine perspective.

Titled *Shy Rose Next Door* and *Tomboy Avocado*, the artworks hint at the worlds of taste and decoration, cosmetic and hygiene advertising, as if they are nail polish names or the names of perfumes. Additionally, the names personify the artworks, almost making characters of them. There may even be a self-portrait amongst *Blue Rinse*. Hartley-Skudder

tends to wear vintage clothing, and often ensures her outfit matches her artwork – especially at an opening. She says that each time she puts on an outfit she becomes a slightly different character, or version of herself. Some of her own full-size objects are painted alongside the miniatures. If we can see these sinks as figures, is one of them the artist?

What's more, the sinks lend themselves towards being considered as elements of human anatomy. Some sinks are overtly curved; Hartley-Skudder even named one *Buxom Blue*. She says that there's a relationship between them as a vessel, with holes, and the way they capture the (somewhat phallic) tap's overflow.

The paintings in *Blue Rinse*, as mentioned, are hung where the mirror would usually be. A weird parallel occurs; we look at the painting, but who before us has stood in this same position? There's a link to expectations of what we look like and how we present ourselves too – especially as women. Were the mirrors used for the DIY blue rinses that Hartley-Skudder's series is named after? *Blue Rinse* takes on the guise of past and present, private and public, prompts us to question what is artificial and what is real. It makes us consider our connection to the bathroom and the time spent in the presence of these objects.

This reconciliation, of painting pastel miniatures while also creating more daring multi-dimensional sculptural work, is something Hartley-Skudder is currently grappling with. It's likely to be a harder sell, but she posits that the installations with the paintings should be purchased in their entirety, as each element is as important as the other. "I was really pushing it, saying that I'm more than just painting pretty pictures," she says. Fortunately, her gallerists, Jonathan Smart and David Alsop of {Suite}, have been supportive. She says she's a bit self-conscious about creating representational paintings, and her new works are a bit of a reaction against that.

Hartley-Skudder's latest exhibition was at Spring 1883, Melbourne. Her concept for this exhibition is hotel art – is that an oxymoron? But taking inspiration from the mini bar, she painted eight works, and experimented with oval and



Shy Rose Next Door, 2018, mixed media, including oil on linen, 278 x 278mm (painting), 1150 x 1150 (wall).
 Courtesy of Jonathan Smart Gallery



circular frames, and using carpet details from the hotel room in which they were exhibited as a backdrop. “Traditionally, ovals are often used for portraits – so I’m responding and adding to that. They are also rather kitsch.” She has an interest in the idiosyncrasy of these types of spaces. “I think spaces like hotel rooms, bathrooms, showrooms, are so strange. They are very familiar and ordinary, but they’re also constructed and trying to make you feel at home. These spaces are models.”

Hartley-Skudder will soon embark on another venture, having been awarded the Asia Residency Exchange’s residency in Xiamen, China. She has a plan. The city has the third largest oil painting production base in the world and has companies with thousands of artists producing paintings to order. “I heard from a previous recipient of the residency ...that things washed up on the coast of Xiamen all the time. Good things, even new things.”

She plans to go to the beach between the tides, and before they are swept clean, doing what she does best – collecting. She’ll photograph what she finds – with minimal staging and backdrop. Then she also hopes to take advantage of Xiamen’s oil painting industry. “I’ll get nine artists to paint my photographs of each object. They’ll be like editions. I’m looking at taking mass-produced objects and then mass-producing them as paintings. Then I’ll paint each object too.” This is the well-intentioned plan, anyway, although Hartley-Skudder admits it might change on arrival. She confesses she has yet to renew her passport.

It is easy to get lost in Hartley-Skudder’s world. She takes the everyday, and funny little objects, and transforms them through layers of paint and trickery. When writing about her work, art writer Megan Dunn noted that “it’s not a fashionable time to be a realist”. True, but Hartley-Skudder is definitely fashionable. Who else gets such pleasure out of painting everyday objects such as taps? “They’re just so fun to paint!” And who else is capturing these objects and spaces that sit between definitions? It’s real, it’s fake and it’s completely different. Maybe we shouldn’t be trying to define it, and instead be happy sitting in the space between.

Below: *Room Service*, 2018, oil on linen, 220 x 185mm.
 Courtesy of {Suite} Gallery

