

Tiarney Miekus, *Where intimacy happens*, The Sydney Morning Herald, 1 May 2020

The Sydney Morning Herald

CULTURE ART & DESIGN SPECTRUM

Where intimacy happens

By Tiarney Miekus
May 1, 2020 - 4.00 pm

Since art can be a mediating force for how a person can understand themselves and their life, and since life right now involves a perpetually interior existence between three or four rooms, I have lately been imagining myself as one of Prudence Flint's painted women.

Hunched and eating a lonely bowl of soup; completing the ineloquent but necessary daily ritual of spitting toothpaste; standing aimlessly under shower streams; looking into mirrors; sitting; lying every which way, eventually resigned to the position of hanging upside-down off the end of the bed, staring until the end of time.

Such solitary, domestic moments of womanhood have accumulated into a 30-year obsession in the Melbourne-based artist's paintings. Women (and sometimes, but rarely, men) with pink-tinged skin are often poised in vague interior settings, among flattened yet shadowed backdrops, with perspectives reminiscent of a dream logic. Why are they almost always inside? "It's where everything happens," Flint explains. "It's where intimacy happens."

While the images are unnervingly intimate, they are not sexualised: these are not women from magazines or Instagram influencers. They have what might be called "flaws", but this is just realism, which is to say it's female vulnerability. To look at these women feels voyeuristic for they never look at the viewer – and, like all voyeurism, they reveal something within the onlooker.

For Flint, painting women edges between conscious and intuitive. She grew up with four older brothers and a mother who gave birth to her in her 40s – two things she says made her both estranged from and curious about her own gender. "It's like a wound," is how she puts it. "I always think artists have to have a wound that they manage and return to, and it causes you to work and create an area of intense interest, which is often deeply unconscious." And the wound? Flint's lifelong relationship with her own femaleness.

As with much art, the more subjective the preoccupation the louder the resonance: Flint has received numerous accolades including winning the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize and being a seven-time Archibald finalist. Yet success is also tangential. People are not drawn to Flint's women because they are well-known. They are drawn to the women because Flint makes you want to know them.

There is a quality to the women's poses – the carefully tended angles, the fine-tuned light, the way they exist mid-pause in a domestic action – that makes them appear simultaneously unguarded and posed. They feel so commonplace, but also entirely elsewhere. Flint gives just enough psychological richness for us to imagine their lives. If she were a comedian, her timing would be impeccable.



Blue Cotton Dress, by Prudence Flint.



Spit by Prudence Flint, whose subjects are "not women from magazines or Instagram influencers".

Part of this visceral quality lies in Flint's ability to paint experience itself. "I want to embody the feeling of being in a feminine body," she tells me. "The dysmorphia, the swollen sensations. I want to understand the loaded place of the fetishisation and the sadistic impulses that the feminine body enlivens in culture."

Alongside this attentiveness to visceral experience, the artist is also realistic about womanhood. She acknowledges sadistic impulses and how women must survive a culture that pits them to betray one another. More importantly, she is empathic about these things, and she finds a way through them via painting, reclaiming a space where women can be with women, within an art history where women have often been whatever men have painted and eroticised them as.

Yet within this lurks the question of whether women look at other women as they imagine men might look at them. "Do you actually think that?" asks Flint, both exasperated and intrigued. "Really?"

I think of the late critic John Berger: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female." To some extent Berger was right when he said that the survival of women meant imagining themselves as men must – but what about those secret looks women give each other? Perhaps Berger didn't know how two women can pass in the street and be overwhelmed with feelings untethered to an erotic male gaze. He certainly didn't know that Flint often thinks about these acknowledgements, and the importance of things like hair. "Women with grey hair," says Flint, "we always smile at each other."

And where would anyone get this information from? Art has not easily allowed moments of genuine interest between women, and it's only lately in the mainstream that we've been seeing women with women (and unbalancing the entire concept of binary genders altogether).

Yet since the 1980s Flint has forced painting to accommodate female personhood and give emotional truth to women's inner lives. When an artist's gaze is as persuasive as Flint's we're compelled to adopt this gaze too, where what we witness in her paintings feels like the intimacy of life itself. Now that we're spending more time with ourselves in life under COVID-19, this gaze feels more pronounced and meaningful than ever.



Prudence Flint's works capture solitary, domestic moments of womanhood