

Chloë Ashby, *In the Studio with Prudence Flint*, TOAST Magazine, 22 October 2020

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In the Studio with Prudence Flint

ARTS & CULTURE



In this series, we chat with inspiring women artists around the world about their life and work and everything in between.

When Prudence Flint started to paint women in everyday settings, her work was promptly described as “domestic”. “It’s not a sexy title, is it?” she asks. “It felt confusing because if I put a woman outside she was subject to another limit and scrutiny. So I started to think about dreams and giving myself space in that way.” In other words, Flint liberated her sitters by introducing into those everyday settings a touch of the surreal.

The Melbourne-based artist’s paintings show strong female characters going about their daily lives – sitting, sleeping, showering – in peculiar, pastel-hued interiors. There’s a monumentality to the figures that lends them a sense of rootedness despite their strange surrounds. As a viewer, this solidity makes you think about how it feels to have and inhabit a body, and consider the way in which we look at women’s bodies in general. It also reflects the emotional weight that we as women lug around with us. “I grew up with three older brothers, to an older mother,” says Flint. “My femaleness has been my interest from a very young age.” She had to fight for her voice growing up and today she channels it into art. “I paint my lived experience.”

For the past 23 years, Flint has been living and working above a Victorian shop front on a busy street in Melbourne. After graduating with a degree in design she dabbled in freelance work for women’s magazines, but it wasn’t long before she was back at university, this time focusing on fine art. “I realised I was



interested in how female desire is represented and what it is," says Flint. She sees painting as a way of making peace with her own femininity, as well as a way of taking risks with it.

In her studio, high north-facing windows let in ample light and there's a sofa for reading or sitting back and sizing up works in progress. It's a small space so it needs to be neat and tidy, Flint tells me. She tends to work on two or three paintings at a time, roping in one of several close friends to model for her when she's imagined who would best suit the character in a certain scene. "I set up scenarios and take photographs – that part is collaborative," she says. "Then I make up the large forms and space of the painting."

The closely cropped scenes are free from distractions. Other than the odd prop – a seashell, say, or a slice of watermelon – the focus is entirely on female figures in various stages of undress. Whether perched on the edge of a bath or stretched out on a bed, alone or in company, they look blankly on, absent-minded. Their poker faces heighten the emotion. Who are these women? What are they thinking? How are they feeling? "Too much expression would be crass and close down any real tension," says Flint. "I want the bodies to feel uncomfortable and command an ambiguous presence." An ambiguity that leaves room for us, the viewers, to imagine.



The lack of theatricality extends towards the almost empty interiors in which the women appear: a bed is a plain mattress with a single unstuffed pillow; a tub is tomb-like. And yet, the sherbet colours, flat geometric shapes and distorted perspectives remind us that these settings are fictional. As Flint says, "They're paintings after all." They're surreal. The fleshliness of Flint's passive pink-skinned sitters feel enticingly at odds with the angular furnishings and the sharp line where the wall meets the floor.

The solitary nature of Flint's sitters calls to mind Edward Hopper's lonely night owls, who also inhabit funky-coloured scenes, but it's women artists she most admires – “they give me permission to go that little bit further”. Take her fellow Australian artist Deborah Walker, whose seemingly straightforward portraits are wound up with complex emotions, and New York-based Jocelyn Hobbie, who paints young and beautiful women in contemplative states. “Historically we're so used to seeing women represented by the male psyche, in film, literature and painting,” says Flint. “We're so deeply accustomed to this that we struggle to recognise anything else. Does a woman actually exist? Am I too only an echo? A performance? I love these questions.”



Flint used to be a film obsessive and she continues to read widely, from classic to contemporary fiction – unsurprisingly, she loves a female protagonist. Recently, she's been listening to music too: “I seem to need to dream off a lot these days.” She's working towards a solo show at Mother's Tankstation in London, which is slated to open in April 2021. “Sometimes a painting will deeply worry me, and I struggle with doubt, and I need to find a way to critique myself and transcend the subject matter through the act of painting,” she says. “Occasionally a painting happens so quickly and with such ease that it's a guilty pleasure and I paint early in the morning in my pyjamas before I've eaten breakfast, and it's pure joy and release.” Look at her paintings and you too will feel yourself letting go, a weight lifting.



Words by Chloë Ashby.

Portrait photograph by Anna White. Images courtesy of Prudence Flint.