

Percival, Linda, *Prudence Flint*, The Edge, 9 December 2023

2 DECEMBER 9, 2023, THE AGE



LINDY PERCIVAL

## TAKE 7

**WORST HABIT?**  
Hypervigilance.**GREATEST FEAR?**  
Not to have a voice.**THE LINE THAT STAYED WITH YOU?**

"Beware the wickedness of the righteous." (Muriel Spark)

**BIGGEST REGRET?**  
Getting carried away.**FAVOURITE ROOM?**  
Bedroom.**THEARTWORK/SONG YOU WISH WAS YOURS?***The Newborn Christ* 1640, by Georges de La Tour, in the Museum of Fine Arts of Rennes in France.**IF YOU COULD SOLVE ONE THING?**

Worldwide education for women.

From main: Prudence Flint in her home studio; *The Cut*, 2023, (top) and *Second Meal*, 2022, are included in the NGV Triennial. MAIN PHOTO: EDDIE JIMPRUDENCE  
*Flint*

The artist's female subjects leave things unsaid – but her men get people talking.

BY LINDY PERCIVAL

*There are women everywhere* in Prudence Flint's world. Their portraits surround her in her St Kilda home-cum-studio, peering into a mirror here, propped on a bed there, accompanied by objects that might mean everything or nothing at all. A banana, an empty violin case, a chunk of watermelon, and a stick of some kind – wand or weapon, it could be either.

The domesticity at the heart of Flint's work is hard to define, but there is no mistaking the parallels between the art and the artist. Flint is as calmly self-contained as her subjects, and within her own four walls are the things that occupy her when she is not at the easel: shelves lined with books, a partially knitted cardigan, and a sewing machine. All of them offer time out from, and sustenance for, the thing that most forcefully drives her: her art.

Flint's studio is at the heart of her home, as essential to her as bathroom or kitchen. "There's no hiding," as she puts it.

On the eve of the departure of her most recent series to the NGV's Triennial exhibition, she declares: "I'll be glad when all these go." "Amazing" though it is to be included in the gallery's global exploration of contemporary art, she is ready to find out who comes next. In another room, the woman at the centre of a partially completed canvas awaits what Flint calls her "curious" process of discovery. "It's almost like I've got to go, 'Who are you?'" she says. "I'll work on her and see who she becomes."

Observers have long speculated about what is going on with Flint's women. They are usually solitary, caught up in their inner world, never meeting the viewer's gaze. "It's like you're looking in on someone," is how she describes it. Such is the power of Flint's women that she has been an Archibald finalist seven times, and won the prestigious Doug Moran National Portrait Prize in 2004. She has collectors around the world, including in Hollywood.

She ascribes her fascination with women to her family background. She was born in the 1960s, the last of four children, and the only girl, to a stay-at-home mother who, unusually for the times, was in her 40s when she had Flint.

Her three brothers were "pretty domineering, and I had to fight", she says. "Instead of becoming a tomboy like them, I went the other way. I was the most educated, and the smartest one in the family." She laughs. "I kind of had to be to survive. Academically, I worked really hard. My father always liked that in me. I was a bit like him, so he would encourage that in me. And he bought me a sewing machine. He loved the way I made clothes, that I could focus and make things."

She tells me about the trousers she's wearing, from a pattern she's been making

## Interview



in various fabrics for years. Inside her wardrobe, there must be 20 pairs hanging in a neat row. Flint once dreamed of becoming a fashion illustrator; clothing matters to her.

"[Sewing] teaches you about failure. I used to f-- things up. Dad let me buy this amazing velveteen fabric and I cut it out the wrong way and you have to deal with it. I'm sure it's connected to all my painting now."

When Flint dresses her subjects, she is mindful of the meanings she's attaching to them, even down to the coloured socks that add a quirky authenticity to her figures. "I suppose if I really wanted to unpack it, with women, how you dress, I mean, the high heels mean this, the runners mean that, and I suppose with the socks, they're comforting. And they kind of don't fit.

"Everything a woman wears is full of meaning and consequences. I used to put

*If you desexualise, cover up, or you reveal, it's all fraught.*

them in striped shirts and cardigans and things and I've had people say, 'Oh they look kind of frumpy' ... whatever you do, it's loaded ... So if you desexualise, cover up, or you reveal, or if you make the woman slightly bigger than what people think is normal, or you make them smaller, it's all fraught. It's full of rich places, but it's fraught."

Men have appeared in only four of her paintings, either naked or semi-naked, and very much in the background. Her depiction of them sometimes challenges her viewers.

"We're so used to men being represented as dominant," she says. "People say to me, you've made them look so pathetic. They use these strong words, and I think, 'Oh, I don't think that.' I think I've just put them in the painting quietly. They kind of load it with their own ... anxiety. I think men can be quite passive, and if you represent them like that, it's like, oh my god ... It feels a bit dangerous ... So that's good."

Flint's rich colour palette is often the first thing you notice in her work. "I just use the colours that are beautiful to me," she says. "I don't like garish ... I think I'm quite sensitive to colour. Colour can make me feel sick. Like, ergh. But I know when the colours feel right. It's very emotional, colour."

Look at those books lined up behind the woman in *A Fine Romance #21* (on this week's cover), and you can feel the warmth, as though they offer a kind of protective shield. It makes you want to reach out and read them. From the same series, *A Fine Romance #9*, whose subject sits hunched over a laptop, took out the 2004 Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. The women in the series, reading or writing intently, always with that wall of books behind them, are often interpreted as self-portraits. Flint writes daily and reads broadly; her favourite authors are Virginia Woolf and George Eliot. "My most useful writers are always women," she says. "At the moment I'm going through an Annie Ernaux phase."

She starts every day writing in her journal for an hour or two. Her current notebook – number 185 – is where she "can say anything, unpack everything". When I ask why this daily ritual is so important to her, she says, "It's like asking why would you eat. I've done it since I was about 19."

After her writing is done, she will paint for an hour or so, then perhaps knit for a while. Beside her, a red cardigan is taking shape, the same one she has knitted many times before. "I need to knit at the moment because I need to take care of my nerves while all this [the Triennial] is happening," she says. "Knitting just grounds me. I sit here and I knit and I think. And I just feel it really does my brain a lot of good."

All around her, the women in her paintings are caught up in their own reveries. Dressed in underwear, nondescript skirts, Mary Jane shoes and colourful socks, they're making no effort to catch your eye. But just try looking away.

Triennial is at NGV International until April 7, 2024.