

Saskia Beudel, *Prudence Flint*, Artist Profile, Issue 51, 1 May 2020

ARTIST PROFILE

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CLIFFORD HOW
HELEN EAGER
NICK SANTORO
AL POULET

**Prudence
FLINT**

with Saskia Beudel

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ISSUE 51
artistprofile.com.au



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Prudence FLINT

MELBOURNE PAINTER PRUDENCE FLINT HAS GAINED AN EVER-EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE FOR HER WORK, MAINLY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA CONNECTIONS. AS THE WORLD GRAPPLES WITH NOTIONS OF ISOLATION AND LOCKDOWN, FLINT'S IMAGERY OF SOLITARY WOMEN GOING ABOUT DAILY LIVES IN BANAL BUT UNSETTLING DOMESTIC INTERIORS (OR AN ODDLY CONSTRAINED OUTDOORS) SPEAKS MORE POIGNANTLY THAN EVER.

In February 2020, I meet at Prudence Flint's studio above an old shop on Melbourne's terminally busy St Kilda Road. Flint has painted here for twenty years. Afternoons are her most productive time when the light is 'intense and warm', falling through two sash windows. Propped around the room are five paintings for her new exhibition 'The Wish' at Fine Arts, Sydney.

On a hefty wooden easel in the middle of the room lies a man stretched naked on a mattress, arms by his sides, eyes closed, face tilted towards an ominous little ornament – a witch's head in a green hood. A diminutive bedside clock is frozen at 1:09. A woman stands by his side drinking from a small green cup, clad in bra and a long sheathe of dark-pink skirt. 'Originally she was naked,' Flint says, 'but when I arrived back from overseas I could see she needed a bra. And she needed the skirt as armour.' Then the image started to work. By the woman's feet stand two enigmatic objects: a pink cube and a fine rod. There is the air of suspended narrative. This could be a still from a film, the dynamic between the two figures unclear. They seem caught in a moment of stasis or impasse, trapped in aspic. The minimal title, *The Cup* (2019), provides no further clue.

Behind *The Cup* more canvases lean against a wall. A woman in flesh-coloured underwear lies on her stomach on a pink mattress next to a guitar. Satiny underpants are painted almost lovingly stretched across her buttocks. Her arms are tucked protectively beneath her chest, eyes open. The same slender rod and an oval mirror are arranged nearby. The mood could be satiation, longing, expectancy, loneliness. *The Wish* (2020).

Flint has been creating her mode of distinctive figuration since training at Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in the 1980s when 'painting was having a real surge'. Gareth Sansom, then Dean, was supportive of figuration. Jan Murray, Allan Mitelman and Deborah Walker were all on staff. Since then, figurative painting has waxed and waned, falling in and out of fashion. 'But you can only make the work that you can make,' says Flint. In 2015 she started putting her images up on Instagram (where she has 18.2K followers) – and a whole new phase of her career blossomed, with a much larger international audience. Flint is now represented by mother's tankstation gallery in Dublin and Fine Arts, Sydney – with its curatorial strategies and alignment with international galleries. There is the distinct and happy sense of an artist finding her audience, of her work speaking and communicating in new ways. As mother's tankstation's text for Flint's exhibition 'The Visit' (2019) suggests, 'nothing actually looks or feels anything like a "Prudence Flint", which is simply an extraordinarily rare thing to say. We hear what her voice sounds like.'

'Because I'm so isolated – I work from home – Instagram gives me access to the world, you create connections. And it's not about

money. An exhibition can be a pretty dreary thing. *Did you sell?* But social media is about sharing an idea. It has integrity. You can be affected by someone's work on-screen. It's beautifully backlit. And the format does suit my work because of its graphic quality.'

Flint first trained in Graphic Design and holds a degree in Illustration. In her early twenties she arranged an interview with *Vogue* in Sydney. 'It was a big deal. I had to travel up there. I took a folio with me. They were very nice. They gave me some work. But I dropped the ball on it. I was living in a student house with a tiny desk in my bedroom. It wasn't the way to complete commissions. I fucked it up! But after this and other commissions I realised I preferred doing my own thing.' She was living in Carlton and started going to galleries, saw the work of Vivienne Shark LeWitt and Jenny Watson. 'I hadn't realised you could be taken seriously as an artist – as a woman artist. In those days it seemed as though fashion was where women had autonomy.' She completed a one-year Tertiary Orientation Program at RMIT; then started her second degree in Fine Art at VCA.

Clothing and fashion have remained important to Flint. She sews her own trousers, which have become a signature style, utterly bespoke, and knits her own cardigans and short-sleeved tops. 'It's embarrassing the number of times I've repeated the same cardigan. I laid them out once on my bed to show a friend. But you can make the same style new each time.'

She learned to sew as a teenager and it has helped her as an artist. 'It taught me about passion. I got to imagine what I wanted. Sewing is a self-directed project. Sometimes I would fail. Plus there's an OCD element. Because I make variations of the one thing it's guaranteed satisfaction and pleasure. I have a structure then I create nuance within that. I like limits. Then you get to talk within those limits. You only have so much time in life.'

This concept of limitless variation within known limits also underpins her painting. During the first few months of art school she painted mountains and landscapes (like her artist boyfriend). 'I thought that was art's proper subject. I thought I had to relinquish my idea of being female to be an artist.' Then six months into first year she began painting women from film. She went to life drawing every week, with Lewis Miller as her teacher. 'I loved it. The theatre of setting up the space. It started to inform my paintings. The way light falls on the form, like Vermeer, there's one window and light falls through that window. It became my template. Something lifted, something shifted. I knew what

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- 02 *Shower*, 2016, oil on linen, 117 x 97 cm
03 *Spit*, 2014, oil on linen, 91.5 x 107 cm
04 *Contact Lens*, 2009, oil on linen, 114 x 102 cm
05 *The Deal*, 2020, oil on linen, 107 x 135 cm

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I wanted to do. It's libidinal. I found a voice. I got a handle on something. I realised I could set up a space in the painting and tell a story. The limit of that is really great. And there's a whole world you can set up within it.'

And so, over the years, she has innovated within this template, her work featuring women (alone or in twos or threes) mainly in sparse interiors. Even when set outdoors – a park, a bench-seat, a street, a strip of seashore – the space is tightly bounded, almost claustrophobic, resolutely non-realist. Sometimes perspective is distorted, following a 'haptic logic' rather than a 'photographic logic' as Flint puts it in one interview (*Juxtapoz* 2020), set at a steep tilt, as if everything might come sliding off – as in *The Blow* (2020). 'There's something raw about women with no bras on. I wanted to create something a bit apocalyptic with the forest above, something unfamiliar and unsettling.' An axe propped between two of the women's feet suggests a quiet undertow of imminent violence – or not. Its object might be the forest – such as it is, tree trunks are reduced already to leafless homogenous poles – or it could be human.

Within pared back indoor spaces women go about their daily lives: showering, eating, lying prone or draped over the edge of a bed, gazing into space, applying a contact lens, playing a guitar, working at a laptop, taking a bath. Within the 'container' (as Flint calls these spaces), with all their subdued theatre, single objects become highly charged props: an apple, an axe, a shell, a postcard, a bowl of sweet-and-sour soup, two fried eggs on a plate, a slice of watermelon, a thread of red cotton (think Vermeer's *Lacemaker* with its radically innovative rendition of cotton threads, almost like a Pollock), a single silvery length of spit at a basin when brushing one's teeth. These objects could be symbols but they resist any easy translation or equivalence. They also do formal work: *that* colour (or shape) against that colour. But they're not merely formal: there's also a webbing of narrative and autobiographical material. Objects freighted with personal association move back and forth between the artist's life and her paintings. On a shelf in her studio stands the little green-hooded witch's head from *The Cup*, found in a drawer when Flint cleared out her mother's house after her mother's death; next to it, a postcard from an absent lover, featured on the edge of the bath in *The Gift* (2019); a shell depicted in *The Deal* (2020) (and other paintings) resides in her actual bathroom. The list goes on.

Flint's paintings derive from personal experience – sometimes something banal from everyday life. 'I might be sitting alone in a restaurant eating a meal and I'll suddenly think, this could be a painting.' Or from something deeply personal, worked through in the journals she has kept for decades. (She is now onto her



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140th book – she brings out a pile of them, opens the first, written in her nineteen-year-old hand; scattered among the writing are tiny sketches, the beginnings of ideas, dreams, the sorting out of particular paintings. 'Everything starts in the journal,' Flint says.) She will imagine the painting, do some sketches then have a friend model 'for bits of information I couldn't make up myself.' Usually Flint photographs her models, although she does also run weekly life drawing classes in St Kilda. We leaf through her life drawings, many of them exquisite. Her sketches of ideas (different from the life drawings) form a body of work in their own right, with their direct, spare gestural quality and forthright subject matter, often more risqué and explicit than the completed paintings. 'What works in a drawing doesn't necessarily translate to a painting,' she says.

The starting point for a painting 'is always just a twig of an idea. What makes an idea work is layers of referencing.' This could be to other artworks: *The Gift* is informed by Egyptian sarcophagi Flint viewed last year at the Louvre. 'I wanted to convey the sense of a queen seated on the edge of the bath. But there's also the drama of being topless. Like one of those dreams where you're naked in front of the class, exposed and vulnerable.' The idea becomes many things at once, unsettling and elusive, worked through in the act of painting itself. Other works are informed by early northern European religious

"There's the drama of being topless. Like one of those dreams where you're naked in front of the class, exposed and vulnerable"



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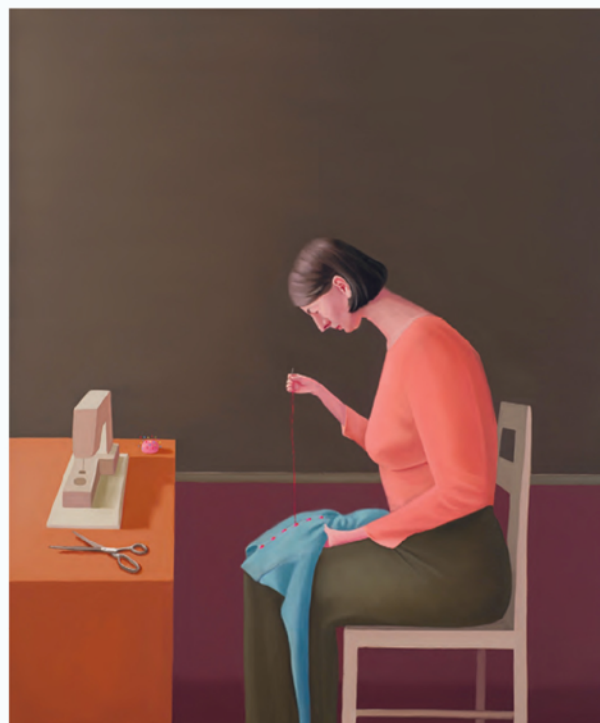
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PROFILE Prudence Flint

paintings of which Flint speaks so eloquently, where perspective doesn't quite work – a foot is far too large for a baby's body, a leg is in the wrong place, but what matters is 'the gesture of intimacy' or eroticism, a 'fearless sentimentality' intended above all to embody and convey a sense of wonder, feeling and tenderness.

A single painting takes three months to complete. 'The first month is for blocking in. The next two are for moving things around, working on detail, getting colours to harmonise, talking and jumping against each other, tweaked until everything is just right. Not just colour, the *temperature* so spatially it starts to work.' The two months are also for building up richness of paint: several layers built up slowly, adjusting shapes and forms, until the painting has some body to it.

Straight after our meeting, Flint texts me a photo of a snippet from Julia Kristeva, her index finger with dark crimson nail polish in the frame, pressing against the page: 'If we were not all translators, if we were not constantly exposing the strangeness of our inner life ... to transpose it into other signs, would we have a psychic life, would we be living beings? "To estrange" one's self from one's self and to continue to be the messenger of this constantly rediscovered strangeness ...'

Only weeks later, as people the world over grapple with isolation, lives conducted within confined indoor spaces, within a radically reduced 'daily round', Flint's images of figures in supposedly banal

settings, their suspended gestures super-charged but somehow unreadable – made strange – have become even more timely. Curator and historian Katy Hessel (@thegreatwomenartists) writes: 'I'm finding Prudence Flint's solitary, inward, muted, paintings of subjects going about their daily routines more resonant than ever.' Increasingly, her work is being tagged for the way it speaks to 'this strange time'. ■

@prudenceflint

prudenceflint.com

EXHIBITION

The Wish
 Until 20 June 2020
 Fine Arts, Sydney

06 *Sweet and Sour Soup*, 2012, oil on linen, 114 x 102 cm

07 *The Blow*, 2020, oil on linen, 135 x 107 cm

08 *The Wish*, 2020, oil on linen, 122 x 102 cm

09 *Cut on the Cross*, 2013, oil on linen, 127 x 102 cm

10 *Button*, 2012, oil on linen, 122 x 102 cm

Courtesy the artist, Fine Arts, Sydney, Bett Gallery, Hobart and mother's tankstation limited, Dublin and London