





# AMBER KOROLUK-STEPHENSON QUIXOTIC HABITATION

MOP PROJECTS 2013

## ***All that Glisters is Not Gold***

Catalogue essay by Dr Lucy Hawthorn

Amber Koroluk-Stephenson's exhibition title *Quixotic Habitation* evokes the unreal, the unpractical and the ideal, for the term 'quixotic' stems from Miguel de Cervantes' delusional hero, Don Quixote. In a lengthy speech, Quixote's squire Sancha Panza, declares, "all that glisters is not gold," indicating that first impressions or at least a surface reading are rarely indicative of the truth. And so it is with Koroluk-Stephenson's paintings, which demand a double take, a second glance, a deeper reading.

It's apt that the idiom 'double take' stems from filmmaking. Like a Tim Burton set there is a slight delay before we realise the scene before us is not an idyllic suburban paradise. The landscape is familiar yet unreal, the fruit falls too conveniently on the picnic rug, the exotic shrubbery is at odds with the post-war weatherboard houses and 1990 model wagon, and the newly laid grass is already seamless. In each painting, the characters of Australian suburbia play a familiar role: a teenager sunbakes on the grass next to her hose-wielding little brother, the family dog patiently waits by dad as he carefully rolls out turf, and two young boys fascinated by something in the pebbled garden feature are clearly up to no good.

The unsystematic perspective and unnatural lighting are also suggestive of theatre. The houses in the triptych, *Staging of an Illusion*, celebrate a certain 'anti-perspective', the oblique angles akin to those seen in pre-Renaissance paintings. And this perspective seem at odds to the textbook rounding of the backyard pool and carefully rendered backyard paraphernalia, hinting at the 'staged illusion'. Plants around the perimeter form a brightened arena or stage, isolating the characters from the other dwellings that dot the far-off hills, and a new concrete path oddly services the hills hoist rather than the house. *In the Interlude* also abandons illusionary perspective at times. The buildings and cars are flattened and by consequence draw attention to the four figures in the front yard. The characters' pursuits appear purposeless and in the context of this exhibition the painting acts as the 'interlude' between the more idyllic scenes depicted in the other two works. *Prelude at the Garden's Edge* is more overt in its titling and contains multiple references to Eden: the apple tree, the woman asleep on the

grass, and the young boy holding the snake-like garden hose over a bed of healthy seedlings. Beyond the white picket fence lies Hobart's Tasman Bridge – an identifier at odds with the backyard's tropical plants. The inclusion of exotic plants, many of which were sourced from the internet, is the artist's response to the lack of native species planted around Hobart. The act of removing nature and replacing it with an exotic 'other' is not new to Australia; in fact, when the British colonial settlers first arrived in Sydney, their attempt to replace what they saw as a foreign nature with the familiar English landscape, established an unofficial plant hierarchy that still somewhat persists today.

The Australian obsession with suburbia and the 'aspirations' of the working class is humorously reflected in Koroluk-Stephenson's paintings. In particular, the favourite phrase of Australian politicians, "working families", comes to mind when viewing *Staging of an Illusion*. The father works the garden; the kids play in the pool; they have a dog, a cat, and a shiny hills hoist (strangely, no mother figure though). It's all a bit kitsch, a bit creepy.

Dr Lucy Hawthorne is a Hobart-based writer and artist.



*Prelude at the Garden's Edge* 2013, oil on canvas, 112 x 122cm



*In the Interlude* 2013, oil on canvas, 112 x 122cm

Cover image (detail)

*Staging of an Illusion* 2013, oil on canvas, 168 x 366cm (triptych)



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