

Unpublished review

**Greer Honeywill: Off the Plan**

Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne

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**Simon Gregg**

Curator of the Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale

I think it was Charles Baudelaire who wrote of the unquenchable thirst for travel, declaring that the true desire was to escape: 'Anywhere! Anywhere! So long as it is out of this world!' It might seem peculiar to be reminded of such a declaration when visiting an exhibition overflowing in paeans to domesticity, but then Greer Honeywill is just such a peculiar artist. While her tales of domesticity have their foundations in the pantry and the kitchen sink they transport us into worlds of bewilderment and wonder. Physics and scale mean nothing and houses become mere playthings, with entire structures thrown about with the ease of a child's toy.

But if this sounds like an unstructured art practice do not be fooled – Greer Honeywill is a most erudite artist: thoughtful, methodical and systematically building and rebuilding the blocks of our everyday world. Over recent years her practice has shed many layers and, like an onion, has arrived at an elemental visual vocabulary. *Off the Plan* explored a new tangent to her language by mining the cavernous void between the masculine and sterile realm of architecture, and the reality of everyday life with buildings. Where Honeywill had previously explored cities and suburbs, here she honed in on her central motif: the house.

By dismembering the construct of houses – their ideals and archetypes – Honeywill rewards us with moving insights into our own domestic condition. She is gifted at reconciling polarities, such as the hard-edged aesthetics of Modernism and the gentle flourish of domesticity, which she distils into an arcane language of signs. Honeywill creates not the houses we live in now but the houses we dreamt of as children; simplistic structures that have more in common with Monopoly houses than actual bricks and mortar.

In spite of their fictive fabrication they arouse another real-life likeness: the 'McMansion'. A fantastical apparition if ever there was one, this oversized house-on-steroids of the suburban fringe is the object of frequent disdain for its wanton disregard for neighbours, for scale and for permanence. It is the improbable dream house of the child made real, while somehow retaining the improbability of dreams.

*Off the Plan* was materially the antithesis of all the McMansion stands for. Honeywill's houses are determinedly diminutive, fantastically well built and flamboyantly nimble, but for all this disjunction they do share a common language: the dream. Le Corbusier's assertion that 'a house is a machine for living in' has troubled those who live in them for decades. None more so than Gaston Bachelard whose *Poetics of Space* (1958) reinstated the important relationship between home and our growing sense of identity as a child.

If the home nurtures dreaming, as Bachelard suggested, then Honeywill posits the house *as* dream. In her works *Wrap* and *This Housing Estate is not to scale* the house became a toy, multiplied and made to perform dazzling acrobatic feats. The houses in *Wrap* formed an archway over a tricycle, where the latter filled the role of stern parent. These projections of parent/child relationships abounded throughout *Off the Plan*; in *Laughter Forbidden* a scooter was made to stand in the corner like an admonished child while a litany of offences were tallied on the wall behind.

The most immediately arresting work was *Shadowboxing*, which disoriented through confused scale and unsteady footing. This was a brilliantly realised work in which three miniature models of Paul Rudolph's 1961 Modernist home for the Milam family were towed by an authentic, rusticated child's tricycle. Honeywill, here, summoned considerable guile to fathom an object that was at once familiar and alien. Rudolph's geometric edifice was reduced to the status of furniture but its sterility remained intact; it was the cold Modernist grid that Mondrian dreamt of wrought solid. The repetition of form is a Honeywill hallmark, mirroring the sprawling suburbs that are so often under her scrutiny, but *Off the Plan* introduced welcome relief in the form of the found children's tricycles and scooters. The scooter in *Shadowboxing* brought an element of chaos to the affair. It disarmed the seriousness of Rudolph's house by snatching it by the leg and dragging it through the gallery.

Precision is another Honeywill hallmark, and in *Off the Plan* she wore it with pride. For all their apparent delirious lack of decorum the works were fabricated and presented with the exactitude of an architect. Even the tricycles submitted to this imposition of order, forming a dazzlingly choreographed spectacle of forms. Honeywill made the gallery space her own, exploiting its darkened corners and open panoramas with equal aplomb.

Many of Honeywill's works are realised with the assistance of skilled craftsmen, and their stunning handiwork heightened the presence and gravitas of each piece. In terms of build quality alone, no other artist comes close to matching Honeywill's exacting standards. The proficiency of technique is integral to Honeywill; part of her charter is to dramatise the failings of contemporary residential construction. Built to last only 25 years, today's houses are, cries Honeywill in the catalogue: 'massive, meaningless, gardenless, boxes for habitation...' There are houses, she tells us, and there are homes, and in *Off the Plan* she unites the two with a clang that might just be the death knell for Modernist architecture.