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“In the house of my childhood there was always a sense of disturbance born of too much repetition and too much denial of the self in the service of others.”

*Greer Honeywill*

Greer Honeywill's sculptures are at times, unsettlingly revealing. While born of motifs to which we can all relate – the home, the domestic, the role of women, the ties of family – our experience of these meticulously constructed objects is never so straightforward. Initial introduction to Honeywill's work may establish a sense of cosy familiarity, but it is not long before their confessional nature takes hold and we come to realise the tensions barely held in check beneath their pristine wooden surfaces. These sculptures are embedded in 'the personal' and informed by memory, and in discussion about her practice, as well as her writing on it, the artist liberally draws upon her childhood experiences (and particularly, those of her mother) in suburban Adelaide in the 1950s. But it's here that questions begin to be raised and things start to get uncomfortable. Are the hints of frustration, the weight of expectations and responsibilities, and the sense of immense, but ultimately constrained grief that are conveyed ever-so-quietly by these works, *really* a reflection of the artist's life? Memory is an unreliable and fickle beast and truth can be elastic at the best of times. Honeywill's command of 'the everyday' – of stories neither told nor valued, emerges from this uncertain space, where truth and storytelling coincide. As a result, her practice enables us to reflect upon the changing nature of the home, while also highlighting the broader implications of our continuing fascination with 'the great Australian dream'; that three-bedroom house on a quarter-acre block in suburbs.

The realm of the domestic is immediately established in the exhibition *Against the Grain* by the expansive work *Carpet*, 2005, a large floor-based sculpture comprised of small, puzzle-sized blocks of wood that cuts a swathe through the gallery space like an enormous hall runner. *Carpet*'s impressive scale but low-key delivery manages to both welcome and lead in the viewer (or guest) while simultaneously creating a sense of anxiety through the work's seemingly endless reach. Based on the pictographic quality of children's drawings of neighbourhood and home, the blocks of various timbers that mark out the street and rows of

opposing houses comprising the work's pattern, reflect the subtle shifts in colour that can occur in a woven carpet or the similar signs of wear and tear created by repetition of use.<sup>1</sup> Like much of Honeywill's work in the exhibition, *Carpet* draws its inspiration in part from the relationship between the natural and built environment and specifically alludes to the manner in which Australia's ever-expanding suburbs are literally carpeting the landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Almost in spite of the sameness of the dwellings engulfing our outer suburbs, Honeywill manages to find a beauty in the stages of their construction, especially the moment in which their timber frames commune with their surroundings through the interplay of sun and light.<sup>3</sup> The wonky charm of builders' apprentice models (where builders initially learn proportion and bracing on a dolls' house scale) and the poetry created by their at times obvious mistakes, holds a similar appeal, and it is the artist's collection of these models that initially informed the lattice-like quality of the structures in sculptures such as *Evidence*, 2003 and *Lately my diet has become a trifle monotonous*, 2002. While the 'femme-maisons' of contemporary American artist Louise Bourgeois and the minimalist aesthetic of Sol Le Witt are also of influence in these works, Honeywill's engagement with both the craft of building and respect for the abilities of the craftsman are equally significant to both their conception and creation.

Working in a collaborative and directorial role, Honeywill creates 'worlds' that encapsulate the different perspectives of the child and adult.<sup>4</sup> While the grouping of objects beneath the table in *Evidence* may hint at the games and alternate realities that can unfold beneath its canopy, its white padded surface (which is echoed in the cabinet of *Untitled*, 2003) evokes the warmth and protection of a quilt while also calling to mind the more terrifying possibilities of the padded cell. The clean lines and simplicity of the artist's wooden sculptures are also reminiscent of American Shaker furniture and they similarly share the elegance and quiet beauty of this much admired style. However, the harmony of the

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<sup>1</sup> These timbers include Western red cedar, Huon pine and rosewood.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished notes provided by the artist.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the artist, 25 January 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Honeywill's sculptures are created in collaboration with master craftsmen from around Woodend, the rural area in which she lives and works.

Shaker aesthetic is constantly questioned by Honeywill's repetition of form which in turn becomes an insightful investigation of the differences between the desire for and rewards of nurturing and the darker realities of domestic life. In *Lately my diet ...* for example, the small cookie cutters placed within the tabletop spell out a rollcall of recipes for 'mains' and 'desserts' that sadly convey the day-to-day routine and monotony of women's lives long before celebrity chefs made cooking seem like a hobby rather than a chore.<sup>5</sup>

The altar-like surfaces of the most recent sculptures in *Against the Grain* bear objects that testify to a relatively new direction in the artist's oeuvre, yet the questions surrounding the middle class dreams, values and ambitions that sparked earlier work remain of concern. Built from a playful combination of the skylines of Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, the frenetic pace of the imaginary city of *Variations on monotony*, 2007 may be stilled in Honeywill's work, but the constant demands that are its life force are largely fed by snarls of peak hour traffic filled with overworked suburban commuters. Similarly, while the half-finished apprentice model boat that floats across the surface of *Crossing*, 2007 immediately evokes the trials and tribulations of migration within an Australian context, it travels across a grid of suburban rooftops that form the work's tabletop. Like all of Honeywill's work, these sculptures eloquently convey the push-pull of societal expectations and gender roles, the dream of escape and the place of the self. These works urge us to question our ambitions and desires and reflect upon the true costs of what is lost and gained in their pursuit.

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<sup>5</sup> As Honeywill has said of this work: "In a 55 year period my mother served no less than 166,320 individual meals to her family which averaged three people. In the work, 'Lately my diet has become a trifle monotonous' I celebrate the generosity and madness necessary to perform that task. The surface of the altar or table is inlaid with hundreds of tin cookie cutters spelling out the names of often-repeated recipes found in the 'Country Women's Association, Calendar of Meat and Fish recipes – one for every day of the year', published circa 1955. This was my mother's food bible and the book that nourished me." Unpublished notes provided by the artist.