

## Painted Ladies: Esther Stewart's Propositional Architecture

Esther Stewart lives in a small 1961 brick apartment, located in a block of twelve dwellings in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Brunswick. Navigating the Australian dream of home ownership and the ethics of communal or multi-residential dwelling, Stewart is not uninterested in the bureaucracy of bodies corporate, and the strict rules that regulate what cosmetic changes can be made to the exterior of separately owned apartments. This includes changes to the building's awnings, which must be made from a black-and-white striped material.

In her new series collectively titled *Painted ladies*, Stewart has taken her body corporate's awning rules as her conceptual starting point and has installed four motorised awnings, the exact dimension and make of her own apartment's windows, within the ACCA galleries – only these awnings are made up of colourful shapes and patterns. Stewart's awnings extend physically and symbolically upon her recent exploration of the domestic built environment. For the 2016 exhibition *How to decorate a dump* at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, for example, Stewart built a fictional, scaled-down lounge room within the gallery. For this current project, Stewart has repurposed the imagery from paintings she displayed in her 2020 exhibition at Sarah Cottier Gallery titled *Autofiction*. The large-scale paintings in *Autofiction* were composed largely from the floorplan of Stewart's apartment and, therefore, referenced the very personal logic of her private sphere. Stewart has consciously rejected her body corporate's standard-issue striped material, meaning they would not be permitted in her block.

If Stewart's own domestic experience epitomises the way in which officialdom seeps into most aspects of daily life, she then adds another layer of complexity to the logic of bureaucracy by inserting the awnings into ACCA's institutional architecture. As such, *Painted ladies* explores the very complex relationship between public and private architecture and the invisible frameworks that uphold them. Scale becomes the vehicle through which Stewart considers the relationship of the private to the institution. She has noted that when tasked with installing in ACCA's cavernous galleries many artists might scale their works up, anxious for their artwork not to be drowned out by space. Stewart, however, makes a conscious effort not to succumb to this urge. She maintains domestic dimensions that only serve to emphasise the amplified nature of ACCA's exhibition spaces. Some of Stewart's awnings, installed in the galleries' expansive entrance points, are so dwarfed that they appear to be naively yet defiantly undertaking an impossible task. There is something very endearing about this superfluous action, and it is this quiet determination that offers a tongue-in-cheek critique of ACCA's own architecture.

Of course, one of the critical aspects of Stewart's awnings is that they have no practical use within the gallery. Rendered defunct, Stewart returns her awnings to the realm of painting – the medium with which she is best acquainted. A similar point has been made by art historian Anne Wagner in relationship to American artist Gordon Matta-Clarke. 'Sculpture radically inverts or undoes an architectural object at the level of its function', writes Wagner, suggesting that once Matta-Clark removed the dwelling of its use value, it slipped into the realm of visual art.<sup>i</sup> One is tempted to suggest that Stewart's paintings operate in the realm of the bourgeois, that is where art has no purpose beyond beauty or decoration (as opposed to avant-

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<sup>i</sup> Anne M. Wagner, 'Splitting and Doubling: Gordon Matta-Clark and the Body of Sculpture', *Grey Room*, no.14, January 2004, p.29.

garde art which is, by definition, all about action). But Stewart is not some kind of elitist who wants to maintain class structures by way of art. In fact, institutional critique is at the core of *Painted ladies*. 'They're kind of propositional', says Stewart of these works. 'You can do what you want with a painting. But don't even try it on awnings'. Herein lies the thrust of Stewart's architecture-cum-sculpture-cum-painting. In making her awnings into paintings, Stewart has carved out space to experiment with an otherwise restrictive form.

It is interesting to consider Stewart's propositional designs within the framework of speculative architectures throughout modern history. These include the likes of le Corbusier's 1922 *Ville contemporaine*, a high-density city with an airport at its centre, or the 1960s Archigram with its dynamic designs based on standardised cells originally conceived of as 'plug-in cities'. Both plans were never realised. But they were so materially and technologically ambitious that it's no surprise they were never built. Stewart's speculative architecture, on the other hand, is significantly less ambitious and – as she shows us – can actually be built. The challenges she faces to make these into functioning awnings in the private setting come down to a decidedly late capitalist problem – that of red tape. If Duchamp and his cronies bemoaned the restrictive nature of the institution, Stewart is thriving in it, using the possibility to do what she can't do in her own home. This is not to say that the gallery, as an institution, is not without its faults but, instead, that the logic of the institution extends into our private spheres as well.

Despite the critique seemingly inherent to Stewart's installation, her presentation embodies a generosity and lightness. For the duration of the exhibition, ACCA staff will extend and retract the awnings periodically, as though bringing the small structures to life. This performative aspect gives a level of control over to gallery staff who act, in part, as the architects of their own environments. Perhaps also aware of the alienating quality that architecture can have on the human form, Stewart has been careful to consider the viewer, too, in the schedule. At any one point, a certain number of awnings will be extended so that the viewer has the chance to see her paintings in full. An arm on the bottom of each awning pushes it out 300mm from the wall. Positioned at different heights, the awnings invoke the logic of a salon-style hang. But where in the salon paintings are angled down towards the viewer, here the viewer is offered a semi-private viewing of the painting's underside, with the structure becoming a form of shelter. This shelter might be better understood as offering reprieve from ACCA's sometimes overwhelming presence – both physical and symbolic. Stewart finds loopholes – loopholes that allow her non-regulation awnings to exist – that keep painting from collapsing completely into the space of some Greenbergian medium specificity, and that allows for the complex assessment of institutions as both private and public-facing. Indeed, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider the *Painted ladies* series not as an outright denunciation of the institution, but as an exploration of how one might circumvent, distract – or add value to – the inevitable systems encountered in public and at home.

Amelia Winata

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