

Home Truths



Domestic Interiors in
South African Collections

Michael Godby

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Front Cover: Eduard Vuillard (1868-1940), *Interior with Figures under a Lamp*, 1909, gouache on paper, 44.5 x 64.7cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery 409.

Back Cover: George Pemba (1912-2001), *Untitled (Woman Expelling a Man from a House)*, 1988, oil on board, 57.1 x 71.5cm, Tatham Art Gallery 1702.

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1. Lisa Brice (b1968), *Make your Home your Castle*, 1995, mixed media, dimensions variable, Iziko South African National Gallery 96/3.

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Unlike Landscape, Still Life and Portraiture, the Domestic Interior has never been a recognized category in European academic artistic practice: no exhibitions were arranged under this subject and no theory developed around the representation of domestic space, whether empty or inhabited.

As a matter of fact, with the exception of a few *camera obscura* experiments in perspective in Holland in the seventeenth century and private albums of interior views that flourished for a short time in the early nineteenth century, the subject of the domestic interior with no human presence did not appear until the early twentieth century. Significantly, it emerged as part of that movement in which artists experimented with familiar settings to explore the formal problems of converting a three-dimensional subject onto the two-dimensional picture plane. The Cubists and their followers treated Still Life subjects in their environment – bottles, glasses, guitars, etc. – to render volumes and masses on the flat picture surface; and they addressed domestic spaces, especially

their own studios, and landscapes, to convert three-dimensional spaces in the same way. For the same reason, Domestic Interiors, as well as Still Life and Landscape subjects, were the starting point for many abstract compositions later in the century.

In spite of this lack of academic recognition, the Domestic Interior appears frequently in modern Western Art. Following Cubism and its formal experimentation, Expressionism, in painting as well as in film, found interior spaces to be powerful vehicles to communicate the lineaments of the human condition. For Surrealism, the domestic interior provided stage sets for a whole range of associations and imagery. And Pop Art used the domestic interior as a complex matrix for contemporary lifestyle and consumer culture. These movements, and other modern trends, are all represented in this collection.

Historically, the Domestic Interior, like Landscape, emerged as a genre in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the

background of other pictorial subjects. Madonna and Child compositions, for example, were frequently set in a domestic interior, in part, of course, to underline the human aspect of the Holy Family. But in many Biblical narratives – the Birth of the Virgin and the Feast at Cana, for example – and countless stories from the lives of the saints, the domestic setting is an essential part of the story and could, on occasion, lead to extraordinary elaboration of still life details and interior decoration styles: a prime example is Ghirlandaio's *Life of the Virgin* fresco cycle in Santa Maria Novella, Florence. However, while Landscape that developed in a similar way in religious painting could call on classical literature for both precedent and theory that would allow it to make the leap into a subject in its own right, no such precedent existed for the Domestic Interior: on the contrary, the classical theory that did address domestic subject-matter – under the heading of 'rhopography': the description of the banal, the base, that which was literally beneath one's notice – tended to stress its very unworthiness as a subject for art. Thus, while Landscape

emerged as an autonomous subject as early as the seventeenth century, the Domestic Interior, as we have seen, only became an independent subject of painting in the very different conditions of art in the early years of the twentieth century.

The distinctions between Landscape and the Domestic Interior in classical theory – with the one tending to the abstract and poetic and the other towards the specific and the banal – had lasting impact on European art and theory. Within the academic categories of high art from the seventeenth into the nineteenth centuries that included Biblical subject-matter, as well as Historical and Mythological themes, the domestic setting tended to be generalized and obscured even when the narrative appeared to call attention to it. So it was in the less noble categories of painting, specifically Portraiture and Genre that the Domestic Interior (and Still Life) flourished. Portraiture, of course, could encompass both the heroic – in which the specificities of daily life gave way to poetic and noble aspirations of one kind or another – and the precise record of lived experience in which the mundane was obviously celebrated. Grouped at the bottom of the academic hierarchy with Still Life (and what was considered the lower kind of portraiture), the category of Genre painting that extracted moral lessons from everyday experience depended

entirely on the depiction of everyday objects and the domestic settings in which they were located.

Thus before it became autonomous, the Domestic Interior developed as a subject within the two categories of Portraiture and Genre. And both these subjects (as well as Still Life) flourished in the seventeenth-century Dutch School which itself, not surprisingly, was held in low esteem in the art theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While some Dutch seventeenth-century portraiture would aspire to heroic status through the use of abstract landscape backgrounds and other generalizing devices, most maintained the inherently lowly quality of the genre by celebrating either the specific property of the portrait subject – in the form of personal collections in a domestic interior – or his or her taste – with the same material – or some form of moral virtue that invariably was expressed in domestic terms: all these interpretations of the portrait subject are represented in the Michaelis Collection of Dutch art and are in evidence in this exhibition.

Dutch Genre scenes drew from domestic situations to illustrate such ideas as the well-managed household, the proper education of children, marital relations, the treatment of servants, etc., which all depended on an appropriately realized

physical context for the moral to be effective. Obviously recognizing a certain anxiety in a new class of patron, artists produced a large number of works by which this class could distinguish itself morally from others such as capricious militia men and boorish peasants. In many of these works, the domestic setting exceeds the requirements of simple appropriate context and assumes an active role in the drama – the well-ordered space that is the sign of good (female) management, the dingy chaotic space of the alchemist wasting his life in futile pursuit of gold, the book-lined space of the scholar or the divine: in each of these settings the artist has invented a physical context that fully represents the moral identity of their human subject.

Moving into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in France and in England, Genre subjects changed gradually from statements on morality – how one should live – to the genre of sentiment – how one should feel: and, in some ways, our own time is still governed by this concern. Artists discovered a huge number of such subjects, both within the everyday world of affections and, particularly in Victorian England, in anecdotes from history – interestingly, often from the seventeenth-century history of the British Civil War. In these scenes also, the domestic setting became an active part of

the narrative – the Englishman’s home as his castle, defining, expressing, protecting and advertising his family values: in point of fact, the Domestic Interior was more often represented as the English woman at home in her castle! On this basis, in this era of sentiment, the Domestic Interior became capable of expressing an infinite subtlety of fine feeling.

Victorian art of this kind constituted an important part of the foundation collections of the major South African municipal galleries of Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Inevitably, as foundation collections that were imported with the express intention of ‘civilizing’ the local (White) populations, these works were soon attacked from two separate positions. On the one hand, to the local artistic avant-garde of international Modernism, they appeared thematically uninteresting and formally conservative; and, to the nascent South African school of painters, they represented a foreign – and irrelevant – project. Dismissed as without value from all sides, these works were soon consigned to the store-rooms and, on a few occasions, actually de-accessioned to make room for what was understood for a time to be a more contemporary and meaningful taste: for similar reasons, these works are rarely shown today. They are resurrected for the present exhibition because they

not only feature interesting versions of the Domestic Interior in their own right but also, as a school, they may be thought to underpin the figurative tradition in twentieth-century South African art that has always run alongside the more favoured international Modernist school in this country. Women artists especially have represented domestic narratives in well-realized domestic settings. But it has been Black South African artists in particular, from Pemba and Sekoto to Makhoba and Thibeletsa, who have used the figurative tradition to illustrate the conditions in which they live and so have taken the genre beyond sentiment to a new seriousness with both moral and political implications. There is an unmistakable sense of urgency in the Domestic Interiors by these artists in the representation of such vital issues as cultural identity, gender dynamics, and domestic abuse.

The project, then, is not about the history of interior decoration, a topic that is well-treated in the literature. Nor is it about social history that several scholars read perceptively into architectural plans and painted representations of interior spaces. Reference will obviously be made to those studies but our concern here is with the “memories and fancies prompted by paintings of interiors” that Hugh Honour identified as Mario Praz’s project when he claimed to have

written a history of interior decoration. The project is an invitation to read into paintings guided both by this single, most resonant theme, and by the groups in which the works are presented. A simple chronological arrangement of works from the seventeenth-century Dutch School to contemporary South African work would neither guide interpretation nor excite the stimulus of contrast. To pick up, and give space to, the significance of the Domestic Interior as a subject of art – but also that is a shared feature in all our lives - the choice has been made to arrange the works in four groups. These groups are suggestive rather than academically defined and some works could easily be effective in more than one group. Obviously the experience of domestic life – of childhood, of patriarchy, etc. - differed fundamentally from age to age and there is no negation of these differences. But the association of works within their groups is designed to create a common entry point from which further exploration of individual works may be possible. In encouraging a sustained critical engagement with the issue of domestic space as the principal physical framework in which lives are lived, the expectation is that one might extend this reflection outside of the frame, as it were, into the social – ethical and political – dynamics of one’s own life experience.

I: Interior Worlds

At the outset, two installations serve to put the entire project into perspective. In *Make your Home your Castle* (1995) [Figure 1: Frontispiece], Lisa Brice draws attention to the paranoia that affected South African suburbia in the first years of democracy, but which in one way or another is a concern of every home owner, everywhere, at any time. One's home *is* one's castle, the fortress where one lives and the protector of one's earthly goods: to threaten one's home is to threaten one's very existence, certainly in material terms and sometimes also in psychic terms. But the contrast between Brice's caricature of a suburban home and photographs of temporary shelters in Cape Town remind one that domestic spaces are also unmistakable expressions of the socio-economic status of their occupants. Jon Riordan's record of the sleeping arrangements made by homeless people in District 6 [Figures 2a and b] and David Southwood's views of *Victoria Mxenge TT*, one of the many informal settlements that surround Cape Town [Figure 3], document the gulf in economic standing between these homeless, or scarcely-housed people and Lisa Brice's suburban subjects. However, what is not necessarily obvious at first sight is that all sets of work revolve around the same basic domestic values and aspirations: shelter, comfort of a sort, and some form of individuation.



2a. Jon Riordan (b1981), *Entrance to a Three-bedroom Subterranean Home* from the *Signs of Life* series, 2012-2013, archival inkjet on Hahnemuhle paper, 59.4 x 84.1cm, Artist's Collection.



2b. Jon Riordan (b1981), *Makeshift Bed*, November 2012, from the *Signs of Life* series, 2012-2013, archival inkjet on Hahnemuhle paper, 59.4 x 84.1cm, Artist's Collection.



3. David Southwood (b1971), *Victoria Mxenge TT, Cape Town*, 2013, inkjet print on paper, 23 x 28.8cm, Artist's Collection.



4. Gwelo Goodman (1871-1939), *Interior: Groot Constantia*, c1928, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 420.



5. Maud Sumner (1902-1985), *Interieur Maria Blanchard*, c1935, oil on canvas, 73 x 92cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery 561.

Shelter, comfort and individuation are the concerns that underlie the entire project in one form or another, from contemporary informal housing to the grand public statement of Gwelo Goodman's *Interior: Groot Constantia* [Figure 4]. These themes are elaborated in *Domestic Interiors* by Maud Sumner, Enslin du Plessis, and Freida Lock, and others, from the 1930s and '40s [Figures 5, 6 & 7] which are amongst the most beautiful works of South African Modernism. These artists took security for granted as they used familiar spaces to extend the formal vocabulary of their art and, in the process, celebrated their own rarefied life-styles. While appearing quite lavish, these interiors are actually quite modest, both in scale and in the material possessions they contain. Generally devoid of human subjects,



6. Enslin du Plessis (1894-1978), *Interior: Sitting Room at Mecklenbergh Square*, nd, oil on board, 60.5 x 91cm, Tatham Art Gallery 0597.



7. Freida Lock (1902-1962), *Interior*, 1945, oil on board, 61.5 x 51.5cm, Sanlam Collection.



they express the taste and values of their owners as they are enshrined in works of art of various kinds, books, vases of flowers, exotic textiles, and comfortable furniture. The same urge to decorate, and to express one's difference from others, is apparent in Ronnie Levitan's *Khayelitsha Interior*, Sam Nthelengethwa's *Room in a Shack*, and Tyrone Appollis', *Gone to the Neighbours* [Figures 8, 9 & 10]. But under the conditions of apartheid urban planning, and its legacy, these interiors also communicate through their spectacular recycled printing material and colourful paintwork a powerful protest against social and political subordination.



8. Ronnie Levitan (1943-2010), *Khayelitsha Interior*, 1989-90, lambda print on paper, 44 x 44cm, Private Collection, Cape Town.



10. Tyrone Appollis (b1957), *Gone to the Neighbours*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 70cm, University of Cape Town A32.



11. Eduard Vuillard (1868-1940), *Interior with Figures under a Lamp*, 1909, gouache on paper, 44.5 x 64.7cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery 409.

Walter Benjamin interpreted the emergence in the nineteenth century of the furnished interior – “the universe of the private citizen” – as the individual’s search for autonomy in reaction to the development of the industrialized city: “against the armature of glass and iron, upholstery offers resistance with its textiles”, as he put it. Eduard Vuillard’s *Interior with Figures under a Lamp* [Figure 11] captures some of the Proustian, claustrophobic atmosphere of these havens from reality – or constructions of a counter-reality – but also gestures to the negative politics of these spaces: according to Benjamin, the traditional interior became so thoroughly imbued with the personality of its owner that anyone else would necessarily feel uncomfortable, even unwelcome, inside it. Because of this, Benjamin celebrated the development in his generation of the glass and steel domestic architecture of Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus and others in that it both offered the possibility of re-integrating private and public spaces and seemed to express resistance to the trend towards private ownership. Justin Brett’s plaster relief *Apartment* [Figure 12], and the construction of which it originally made part, presents domestic accommodation as such a “machine for living”, albeit with an exquisitely refined sensibility. Meanwhile David Goldblatt’s *Interior of a Beehive Dwelling* [Figure 13] demonstrates that Benjamin’s more sociable ideal has persisted to this day in traditional South African architecture.



12. Justin Brett (b1976), *Apartment*, 2012, plaster, 15.5 x 21cm, Private collection, Cape Town.



13. David Goldblatt (b1930), *Interior of a Beehive Dwelling: the Home of Mildred Nene, KwaCeza, KwaZulu*, 31 July 1989, 1989, platinum print on paper, 30 x 40cm, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

All these works represent empty interior spaces, but the ideas of shelter, comfort and individuation also feature prominently in representations of the occupied Domestic Interior. For example, Gabriel Metsu's *Couple with a Child* from around 1660 [Figure 14] advertises the very idea of the prosperous, well-managed home in prized possessions such as the Turkish carpet, the bowl of fruit, and rich dress and furnishings, some of which, like the bird-cage and the grapes, probably also allude symbolically to the notion of marital temperance on which this prosperity was thought to be based. Later expressions of successful relationships represented in domestic interiors tend to stress emotional over material realities through the introduction of a narrative that explains the activities of the people in the room. Thus Albert chevalier Tayler [Figure 15] constructed his image of family life around the routine event of afternoon tea in which everyone – women, children and servants – has their appointed place.



14. Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667), *Couple with a Child*, c1660, oil on canvas, 49.2 x 46.4cm, Iziko Michaelis Collection 14/35.



15. Albert Chevalier Tayler (1862-1925), *Seven Summers*, 1906, oil on canvas, 101.7 x 127.6cm, Durban Art Gallery 77. Photograph: Paolo Menezes.



16. Clare Menck (b1969), *Brekfys by die van Stratens (Johann)*, 2007, oil on panel, 15 x 20cm, Stellenbosch University Museum 2008/004.



17. Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), *The Evening Prayer*, nd, oil on canvas, 46 x 54cm, Revisions Collection.

One hundred years later, in one of her intimate investigations of private life, Clare Menck [Figure 16] shows that, while the formality of the family meal has diminished, the dining table is still a major feature of many homes. Family members gather around this table, not only at meal times but also on occasions of thanksgiving, as in Gerard Sekoto's *Evening Prayer* [Figure 17]. Other companionable practices, such as reading or sewing in the evening [Figure 18], simultaneously assert the unity of the family and their social and cultural status. The unquestioned security of the enclosed domestic world that allows these expressions of cultural value is perhaps epitomised in Henry Tonks' *The Baby's Bath* [Figure 19] in the representation of a naked infant at the very heart/hearth of the home.

The protection and comfort of domestic spaces of all kinds encourage the exploration of further interior worlds in the form of a good book: Philip Wilson Steer [Figure 20] and Bonginkosi Ngcobo [Figure 21] describe utterly different forms of absorption in reading, but both depend on the security and cultural role of the family home.



18. Unknown English artist, *Elderly couple seated in drawing room*, c1880, pastel on paper, 50 x 65cm, University of Cape Town U40.



19. Henry Tonks (1862-1937), *The Baby's Bath*, 1908, oil on canvas, 75 x 75cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery JAG 399.



20. Philip Wilson Steer (1860-1942), *The Sofa (Woman Reading)*, 1889, oil on canvas, 120 x 135cm, Tatham Art Gallery 0107.



21. Bonginkosi Ngcobo (b1971), *An Exciting Book*, 2006, pastel on paper, 40.7 x 47cm, Tatham Art Gallery 2559.



22. David Goldblatt (b1930), *A Girl and her Mother at home*, 22 June 1980, 1980, silver gelatin print on paper, 50 x 50cm, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg.

Domestic interiors, of course, are not only the sites of cultural activity: they are often its crucible. Thus David Goldblatt's *A Girl and her Mother at Home* from his *In Boksburg* series, that documented the culture of a legislated White South African town at the height of Apartheid [Figure 22], illustrates the peculiar conditions imposed on artistic performance at that time: screened from the outside world by net

curtains, and under the stern supervision of her mother, a girl plays the piano accompanied by the strict measure of the metronome and the pathetic example of the caged bird – a rather different caged bird from Metsu's example above. Kim Siebert in *To Women behind Culture* [Figure 23] makes a similar point about the role of Muslim women in the domestic space that, while they may be excluded by patriarchy



23. Kim Siebert (b1958), *To Women behind Culture*, 1983, mixed media on board, 49.5 x 29 x 8.5cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 96/165.

from active lives outside the home, they remain both the inspiration and the power behind its walls. Also pressing culture into a social strait-jacket, William Orpen's portrait of the Randlord *Otto Beit* [Figure 24] brings a library and art collection centre-stage as if to declare the erudition and culture of the sitter before his financial and political acumen.

24. William Orpen (1878-1931), *Otto Beit in his Study at Belgrave Square*, 1913, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 76.3cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery 728.





25. Studio of Paulus Moreelse (1571-1638), *Portrait of a Lady with a Watch*, c1636, oil on canvas, 60 x 44.3cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 299.



26. Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), *Interior, Looking out on Water*, c1668, oil on panel, 56.5 x 47.6cm, Iziko Michaelis Collection 33/6.

Orpen's portrait is one of the few examples, in this collection and elsewhere, of a decidedly masculine domestic space. Most Domestic Interiors not only feature female (and child) subjects, but also very clearly represent a female domain: in South African art, moreover, many of the artists of these spaces have been women. In seventeenth-century Dutch Interior scenes, such as Paulus Moreelse's *Portrait of a Woman with a Watch* [Figure 25], women are often represented as managing the

household: in Dutch symbolism, a watch usually denoted regulation and good order. Where men do appear in these Interiors, they are often dressed in outdoor clothes, particularly hats, to indicate that they have either recently arrived or are about to leave: in Pieter de Hooch's *Interior, Looking out on Water* [Figure 26], the male figure is also associated with the view to the exterior, perhaps even a voyage on the ship that is passing close by the room; the woman, meanwhile, is further separated from her

companion by being raised on a platform that, in protecting her from drafts, also secures her link to the interior space. Other examples of domestic spaces presided over by women feature in different sections of this exhibition. But, as Tommy Motswai's *Happy Mother's Day "Mom"* [Figure 27] makes clear, the sovereign mistress of a domestic space can easily become a domestic slave.



27. Tommy Motswai (b1963), *Happy Mother's Day "Mom"*, 1989, crayon on paper, 54.2 x 74.7cm, Revisions Collection.

II: Behind Closed Doors

As Walter Benjamin observed, security, comfort and individuation in the domestic space can assume negative as well as positive connotations. Screened from view, as if behind Andries Gouws' *Drawn Curtains* [Figure 28], a private space is necessarily isolated from the outside world, and may easily generate a range of unhealthy emotions. In his *Interior in Chelsea* [Figure 29], Malcolm Drummond creates a sense of lassitude amongst the young people confined in an interior space, and seemingly at a loss of what to do with themselves: here the curtained window serves to underline their confinement rather than offer a real connection to the outside world. Darkened interior spaces that offer no access to the outside world are the appropriate environment in Dutch seventeenth-century art for both the futile search for gold in *The Alchemist*, by Thomas Wijk [Figure 30], and *The Sick Woman*, from the School of Haarlem [Figure 31]: in these works, the spatial context itself is an important indicator of unhealthy minds and unhealthy bodies.



28. Andries Gouws (b1952), *Drawn Curtains*, 2003, oil on canvas, 25.6 x 30cm, Private Collection, Koringberg.



29. Malcolm Drummond (1880-1945), *Interior in Chelsea*, 1913-14, oil on canvas, 51.5 x 41cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery 982.



30. Thomas Wijk (c1616-1677), *The Alchemist*, nd, oil on panel, 40.6 x 35.6cm, Iziko Michaelis Collection 41/1.



31. Unknown artist, Haarlem School (17th Century), *The Sick Woman*, nd, oil on panel, 39.4 x 33.3cm, Iziko Michaelis Collection 14/16.



32. Johann Louw (b1965), *Figuur in Interieur I*, 2014, charcoal on paper, 124 x 159cm. Photograph courtesy of SMAC Gallery.

In our own time, Johann Louw suggests that the darkened space of his *Figuur in Interieur I* [Figure 32] acts as a virtual prison on the human subject, constraining and oppressing him. And in their different ways, Wolf Kibel in *Interior* [Figure 33] and Penny Siopis in *Salon* [Figure 34] create domestic environments that are powerfully expressive in themselves, independent of any human presence.



33. Wolf Kibel (1903-1938), *Interior*, nd, oil on canvas, 31 x 67cm, Sanlam Collection.



34. Penny Siopis (b1953), *Salon*, nd, pastel on paper, 55 x 94cm, Sanlam Collection.



35. Gina Heyer (b1983), *Room 3*, 2008-9, oil on board, 30.4 x 67cm, Sanlam Collection.

The reality of a psychic presence in a given physical space is the subject of both Gina Heyer's *Room 3* [Figure 35] and Robert Hodgins' *The Scene of the Crime* [Figure 36]. Both depict banal empty places redolent with the sense of human history; but Heyer's work seems to suggest that human presence has built up in accretions, almost like the layers of her paint on the work's surface, in a place that has now been deserted, while Hodgins' work indicates that a single violent act has affected and transformed the place: as has been claimed for some landscapes, certain spaces somehow retain some memory of the traumatic events that have been enacted within them. Ian Grose also works with this idea in his triptych *Colour, Separation* [Figures 37a, b and c], but complicates it in two quite extraordinary ways: on the one hand, he uses red, green and blue, the colour separations of the new media, paradoxically to affirm the authenticity of his oil medium; and, on the other, he shows that the spectator, or witness, cannot always tell quite what has happened in the intimate spaces he presents, only that it involved strong emotion: was it love, sickness, or even death that has occurred here?



37a. Ian Grose (b1985), *Colour, Separation: Red*, 2011, oil on paper, 60 x 80cm, Kotze Collection.



36. Robert Hodgins (1920-2010), *The Scene of the Crime*, 1994, oil on canvas, 91 x 121cm, Constitutional Court Collection.



37b. Ian Grose (b1985), *Colour, Separation: Green*, 2011, oil on paper, 60 x 80cm, Kotze Collection.



37c. Ian Grose (b1985), *Colour, Separation: Blue*, 2011, oil on paper, 60 x 80cm, Kotze Collection.



38. Zwelethu Mthethwa (b1960), *Empty Bed*, 2000, lambda print, 86 x 119cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 2002/14.

The trace of an absent subject also underpins Zwelethu Mthethwa's *Empty Bed* series [Figure 38] in which the furniture represented stands not for just a moment in the subject's life but perhaps for the very life itself: these works have often been connected to the scourge of HIV/Aids in this country. Absence through HIV/Aids particularly

is the subject of Santu Mofokeng's series on *Child-Headed Households* [Figure 39], which poignantly represents the continuity of life in the remnants of homes that departed parents had created for their children. All these works discover trauma lingering in the physical, domestic contexts of peoples' lives.



39. Santu Mofokeng (b1956), *The Mkansi Kitchen* from the series *Child-headed Households*, 2007, silverprint on aluminium, 100 x 150cm. Images courtesy Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.

Another psychic dimension of domestic spaces is suggested by Norman Bryson's application of Freud's theory of the uncanny to Chardin's interior spaces. According to Freud, in order for his gender identity to be secured, the male child must separate himself from his mother, and his mother's world – the *heimlich* – and, on the example of his father, establish an exterior space independent of her. But, in moments of anxiety, repressed memories and desires to return to the mother and her world will resurface in the distorted form of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. Eduard Vuillard's *Interior with Figures under a Lamp* [Figure 11] and Malcolm Drummond's *Interior in Chelsea* [Figure 29], amongst other Interiors in this collection, suggest this idea of the uncanny in the representation of lassitude and indolence that would obviously be disconcerting to certain types of masculinity. In South African art perhaps the greatest exponent of the uncanny is Fred Page who, in *The Porch* [Figure 40] and other work, specialized in transforming the familiar into surreal and threatening apparitions.

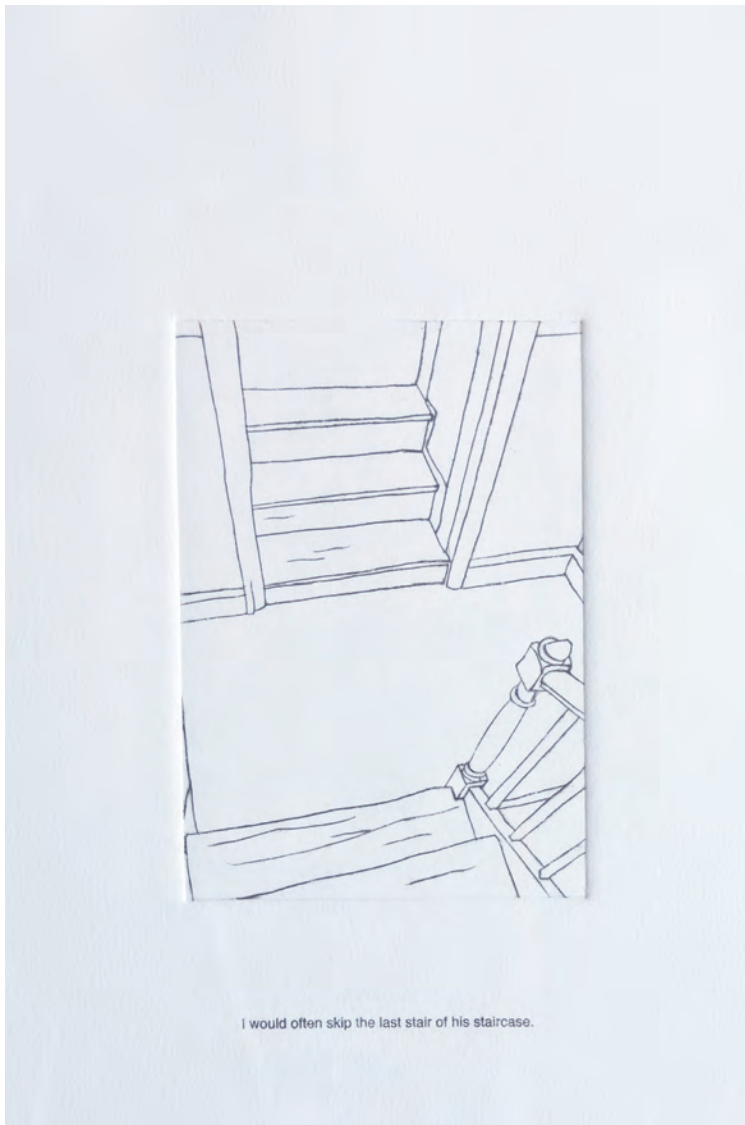
The seclusion of domestic space, in art as in life, has made it the appropriate venue for the examination – and expression – of emotional states of all kinds. In fact, the Victorian exploration of sentiment is, in a sense, simultaneously the exploration of domesticity. The reaction of the woman to the news of the death of her soldier husband in A.C. Cooke's *The Price of Victory* [Figure 41] depends on – but simultaneously defines - her domestic situation: in this artist's view, the feminine space of the home provides space for the feminine expression of emotion. In this way, the domestic space itself may become the vehicle of particular



40. Fred Page (1908-1984), *The Porch*, c1961, acrylic on board, 60 x 60.4cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 92/394.



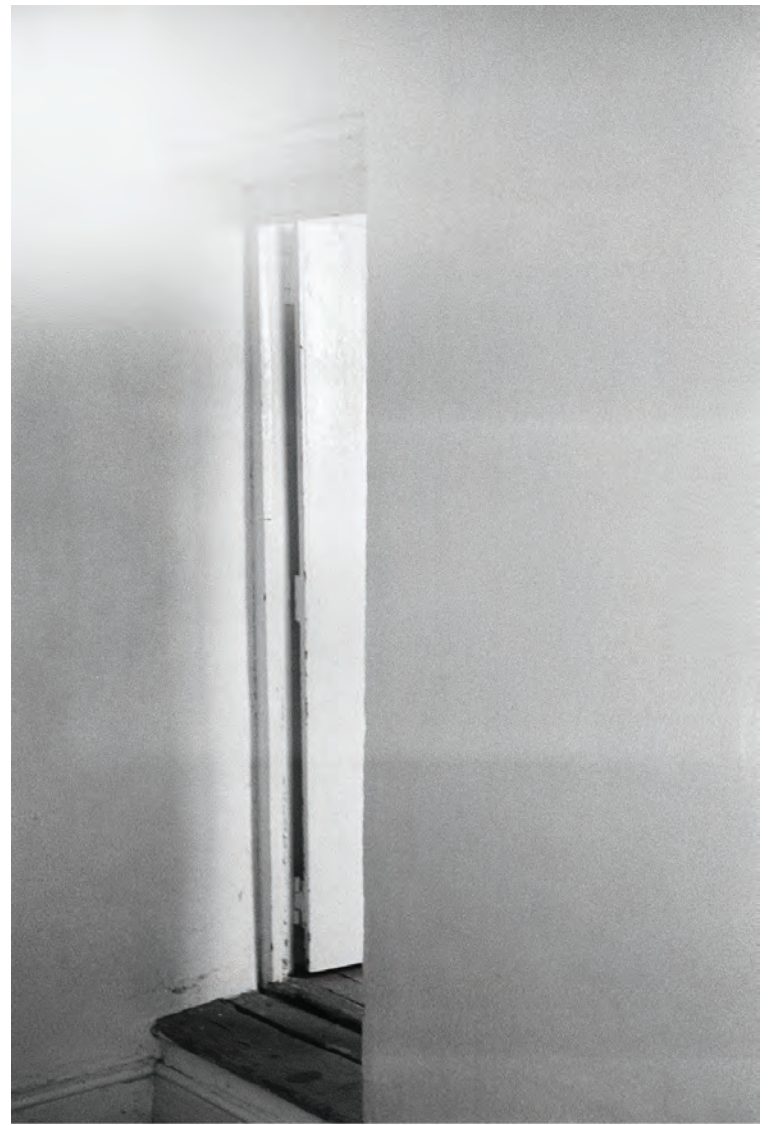
41. Arthur Claude Cooke (dates unknown), *The Price of Victory*, c1909, oil on canvas, 102.1 x 142.2cm, Durban Art Gallery 114. Photograph: Paolo Menezes.



42. Beth Diane Armstrong (b1985), *I would often skip the last stair of his staircase*, 2010, etching on paper, 14 x 9.3cm, Private Collection, Cape Town.

emotional states. If one partner dies or leaves a relationship, their presence may continue to be felt in familiar settings or activities within their shared space. Thus Beth Armstrong recalls her obsessive behaviour in her former partner's home

in a desperate quest to bring him back to life in *I would often skip the last stair of his staircase* [Figure 42]. And Thuli Gamedze's *Odds and Endings* series of photographs of a space she had shared with a partner but developed only after the affair was



43. Thuli Gamedze (b1992), *Untitled (Doorway)* from the series *Odds and Endings*, 2014, archival inkjet on Hahnemuhle paper, 13.2 x 8.8cm, Artist's Collection.

over suggests that somehow the space itself could express her loss even before she experienced it herself [Figure 43]. All these works affirm that trauma resonates as much in the physical environment of one's domestic context as in one's own body.

The seclusion of the home can shade from the private to the concealed or hidden and become ominous or sinister in the process. While one's own practices and rituals, like meal times or evening prayers, will be familiar and therefore comforting, those that are unknown, and practiced behind closed doors, may appear unsettling, even threatening. The animal sacrifice that is implied in Kutlwano Moagi's *Blood* [Figure 44] is intended to bind families together, and to their ancestors, but its residue in a domestic setting appears to do violence to the household.

Seclusion and violence take on another sort of ritualistic function when families attack their own weaker members, especially women and children, in a distorted expression of control over their own lives. Because many Black artists appear to believe that art is an effective medium of social critique and protest, it is particularly they who reinvigorate the tradition of Genre painting from its sentimental Victorian base and create hard-hitting narratives on a range of social issues, including powerful condemnations of domestic violence in their communities. Sfiso Ka-Mkame gives a generalized negative overview of family life in his *Home Sour Home* [Figure 45].

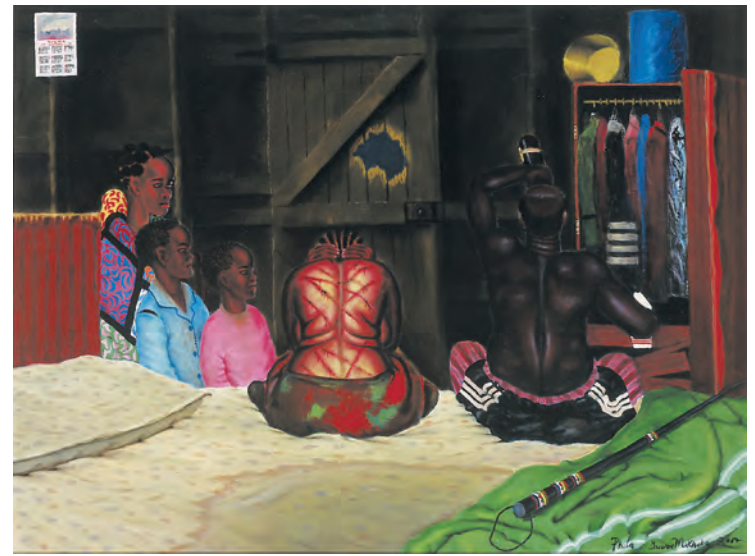
But Trevor Makhoba's *The Writing is on the Wall* [Figure 46] is a searing rendition of wife-beating that is made the more appalling in being witnessed by the couple's own children; and Motseoka Thibelets's *Child Abuse* [Figure 47] depicts not only incidents of outrageous domestic violence but also the family dynamics that allow it to happen. In such works the idea of the Domestic Interior as the home-sweet-home of the ideal 'Happy Family' is exposed as a pernicious myth about modern family life.



44. Kutlwano Moagi (b1983), *Blood*, 2006, digital print, 60 x 60cm, Artist's Collection.



45. Sfiso ka-Mkame (b1963), *Home Sour Home*, nd, pastel on paper, 74 x 109cm, Revisions Collection.



46. Trevor Makhoba (1956-2003), *The Writing is on the Wall*, 2002, oil on board, 60 x 80cm, Revisions Collection.



47. Motseoka Thibeletsa (b1960), *Child Abuse*, 2000, oil on canvas, 99 x 138cm, Wits Art Museum 2001.05.



48. Deborah Bell (b1957), *Eating*, 1986-87, oil on handmade paper, 72 x 64cm, Sanlam Collection.



49. Christine Dixie (b1966), *Of another world entire*, from the *Threshold* series, 1997, etching on paper, 29 x 43.5cm, Sanlam Collection.

III: The World Outside

Interior spaces are understood, perhaps even defined, in relation to the outside world. From outside, interior spaces may be observed, threatened or invaded. Conversely, people may feel trapped in an interior and, in one way or another, seek to return to the outside world.

The Peeping Tom in Deborah Bell's *Eating* [Figure 48] highlights the sense of self-exposure in an intimate, sexually-

charged act that renders the participants vulnerable not only to the outside world but, crucially, also to each other. Similarly, Christine Dixie's *Of Another World Entire* [Figure 49] confirms the vulnerability of her entwined naked figures through their exposure to forces, seemingly less physical than psychological, that are known neither to themselves nor to the viewer. In Sophie Peters' *Arm sonde Hand* [Figure 50], the

unseen intruder has penetrated the space of the domestic interior: but although the householder has summoned the strength literally to disarm his attacker, the severed limb serves as a grisly reminder that the threat to the household is as much psychological as physical. In Peters' work, unusually, it is a man who is represented as vulnerable within a Domestic Interior when it is much more common for the



50. Sophie Peters (b1960), *Arm sonde hand*, 1990, linocut on paper, 23 x 30.5cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 91/175.

interior space to be identified as feminine and the exterior world as masculine. Thus Frank Holl's *Times of Fear* [Figure 51], that illustrates an imagined incident from the English Civil War, shows a Parliamentary troop about to invade a defenseless Royalist household: to Holl's Victorian sensibility, however, the masculine threat to the private, feminine space appears to have been of more significance than the momentous settling of political differences. In George Pemba's *Untitled* [Figure 52], in which a woman is shown expelling a man from her - perhaps their shared - home, the domestic space is not only gendered but is clearly the source of the woman's power.

The perspective of the outside world allows one to see that while some will enjoy domestic space as a refuge, others will experience it as a prison – and those who one day enjoy the privacy and seclusion of a home may, on another day, wish to escape its confines and values. Even without the overt horrors that may take place behind closed doors, it is an inevitable stage of human development to want to leave the nest, enter society, follow one's dreams – and start a home of one's own.

The outside world is frequently signified through the device of the window - with a variety of different interpretations in the paintings in this exhibition. The position of the young woman next to a window in



51. Frank Holl (1845-1888), *Times of Fear*, 1880, oil on canvas, 77.8 x 47.5cm, Durban Art Gallery 2300.



52. George Pemba (1912-2001), *Untitled (Woman Expelling a Man from a House)*, 1988, oil on board, 57.1 x 71.5cm, Tatham Art Gallery 1702.



53. Philip Wilson Steer (1860-1942), *A Chelsea Window*, 1909, oil on canvas, 121 x 90cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery 43.



54. Ernst Liebermann (1869-1960), *Interior with Woman Reading a Letter*, nd, oil on canvas, 75.7 x 65.5cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 2015/26.



55. School of Gerard ter Borch the Younger (1617-1681), *The Letter Writer*, nd, oil on canvas, 56.5 x 43.8cm, Iziko Michaelis Collection 14/59.

Philip Wilson Steer's *A Chelsea Window* [Figure 53] suggests that she is trapped by her situation – as well as her gender – in the feminine space of the home. The globe she is pondering serves to indicate both the scope of the world outside and the restriction of the space in which she is confined. Connection with the world beyond the window is frequently conveyed in art through the device of the letter. Ernst Liebermann's *Interior with*

a Woman Reading a Letter [Figure 54] complements the arrival of news from the outside world by having light flood through the window, as if the mind of the recipient was literally illuminated by the incoming news. In its original form in Dutch seventeenth-century painting - School of Gerard ter Borch's *The Letter Writer* [Figure 55], for example - the motif of a person – invariably a woman – either receiving or writing a letter seems to have

been designed to communicate the idea of mental activity within the subject – thinking, reacting, responding - often with an amorous charge. But it is significant that what is being contemplated necessarily lies beyond the confines of the domestic sphere and so figuratively enables the subject to escape her prison and become part of a larger world. Often books, maps and works of art join the device of the letter in these paintings and encourage the



56. William Kentridge (b1955), *Felix in his room* from the film *Felix in Exile*, 1994, charcoal & pastel on paper, 120 x 150cm, South32 Collection, Johannesburg.

viewer to relate the confined space of the domestic interior to the world beyond the frame. In a work of our own time, *Felix in his Room* [Figure 56], William Kentridge also gives a sense of the possibilities of imaginative travel in the many drawings that flow from Felix's suitcase and line the walls of his room: in this scene, as in others, the freedom that is expressed through works of the imagination heightens the sense of claustrophobia within the room itself.

The popular device of the window plays a major part in John Bacon's *The Ring* [Figure 57], both literally to illuminate the titular subject of the painting and to bring into play the idea of the world outside. In this piece of exquisitely refined Victorian sentimentality, a young woman lovingly inspects the engagement ring that will soon take her out of her childhood home and so separate her from her doting parents who are shown in the background attempting

to come to terms, in their own gendered ways, with this inevitable development. The domestic interior that has served as refuge and nurture for a generation is rejected in the inexorable cycle of life.



57. John Bacon (1868-1914), *The Ring*, 1898, oil on canvas, 100.6 x 125.8cm, Tatham Art Gallery 0432/04.





58. John Muafangejo (1943-1987), *Muafangejo's Kraal*, 1980, linocut on paper, 60.5 x 49.8cm, Revisions Collection.

IV: Inside Out

From the seventeenth century, the period of the earliest work in this exhibition, Domestic Interiors have lent themselves to various symbolic readings: standing in contrast to the outside world, they represent such ideas as the female realm, refuge, prison, etc. To perform these several roles, the Domestic Interior has been depicted as an identifiable architectural place, bounded by vertical and horizontal planes and occupied by furniture, even if it is entirely fictitious. But there are other types of Domestic Interior that have been devised using quite different methods of representation. Instead of a single coherent perspective, artists have occasionally drawn on double or multiple viewpoints to enable more complex physical and symbolic creations. Thus John Muafangejo rejected one-point perspective for his *Muafangejo's Kraal* [Figure 58], and other works, because it would limit the amount of information he could contain in his scene: in order to show internal and external views simultaneously, amongst other aspects of his home, Muafangejo employed multiple perspectives. Similarly, but over three hundred years earlier, in his *Family Group Portrait*, Adriaen van Gaesbeeck [Figure 59] shifted his viewpoint laterally across the surface of his painting to permit him to show – and to celebrate – within an apparently unitary space, the separate features of bed-chamber, saloon and country estate that constituted the main parts of his patrons' property.

Like van Gaesbeeck, Deborah Poynton uses sleight of hand to suggest that the space of her *Interior with Red Tub* [Figure 60] is continuous between foreground and background. Close inspection, however, shows that in spatial terms the two zones cannot connect and are actually quite unrelated. But, in two- rather than three-dimensional terms, the two zones are integrated into a single whole: the texture of the distant landscape of trees, sky, ground, etc., is identical to that of the foreground room and its furnishings suggesting either that the background is just a decoration on the far wall of the room or, more likely, that the primary existence of both foreground and background is as painted marks on the linen surface on which they are made.

Martha Rosler's juxtaposition of a domestic interior with landscape views through its windows in *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* [Figure 61] has a political rather than aesthetic rationale: using the surrealist strategy of collage, Rosler forces the connection between Middle America and the Vietnam War that was being fought in its name many thousands of miles away. Key to Rosler's method, and crucially distinct from Poynton's photographic realism, is her use of photography, both in its documentary function of factual recording and as the principal tool of the advertising industry deployed to convince viewers of the reality of their fantasies. Lien Botha also draws on the indexical nature of the medium, its ability to suggest that what one sees actually existed at least for a moment, in her creation of what she calls "an emblematic interior". In *White Stick for the Arctic: Inside the House the Mother did not Build* [Figure 62], Botha juxtaposes – rather than



60. Deborah Poynton (b1970), *Interior with Red Tub*, 2008, oil on linen, 200 x 200cm, New Church Museum.

collages – two photographs, one from her own environment in which she stands, covered by a table cloth that her mother had crocheted, in a house that is being gradually swallowed by sand; and the other a room full of art works in Italy, the country from which she believed

her mother's family had originated. The absent figure of the mother is lightly conjured in this combination – and further elaborated in the other six works in the series – in a meditation on art, the passing of time, loss and death.

61. Martha Rosler (b1943),
*Bringing the War Home:
House Beautiful*, 1967-72,
photomontage, 35.5 x
48.5cm, Private Collection,
Cape Town.



62. Lien Botha (b1961), *White
stick for the Arctic: inside
the house the mother did
not build*, 2008, composite
photograph, 48 x 74cm,
Artist's Collection.





63. Circle of Abel Grimmer (1573-1619), *Death in the Room*, nd, oil on panel, 34 x 52cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 356.

Death and the emblematic are centre-stage in the theatrical *Death in the Room* from the circle of Abel Grimmer around 1600 [Figure 63]. Opinion is divided on the meaning as well as the authorship of this strange work, but the association of the central figure of Death addressing an elderly woman in front of him, an old man seated by the fire, and a sick person in the

poster bed in the background, all under the triptych on the back wall depicting the Last Judgement, tends to confirm that the painting does indeed represent the idea that Death might appear without warning and that one had best be prepared at all times to meet one's maker. Perhaps not every detail of the work signifies in these terms, but it is easy to read such elements

as the ruined state of parts of the otherwise fine salon, and the still life of perishable vegetables on the floor, as supporting this interpretation of the impermanence of all things. What is certain, of course, is that the interior space itself is not in any way real but a stage-set in which this enigmatic moral drama can unfold.



64. Nomusa Makhubu (b1984), *Amaso neNxowa (Beads and Embroidery)*, 2006, hand-printed photograph on paper, 65 x 85cm, Artist's collection.

Also theatrical, and somewhat enigmatic, Nomusa Makhubu's *Amaso neNxowa* [Figure 64] from her *Grahamstown Observatory* series of photographs, plays with the real and the unreal, the physical and the symbolic. The museum was constructed under Apartheid as a monument to the colonial achievement and, albeit with some awkwardness, still

serves that function today. The museum was originally a private home – a domestic interior of a kind – that when made into a museum came to represent the *idea* of a domestic interior. When this interior was photographed by Makhubu, it was transformed again into a new form of representation – of the *same* domestic interior. Into this conceptual Hall of

Mirrors, Makhubu has inserted her own image that, mimicking the activity of the mannequin, asserts her right as a Black South African to be in this place, to appropriate the culture it appears to represent, while simultaneously contrasting the faded forms of the museum display with her own vital presence.



65. Jean Welz (1900-1975), *Matisse's Model*, 1945, oil on plywood, 58 x 47cm, University of Cape Town W8.

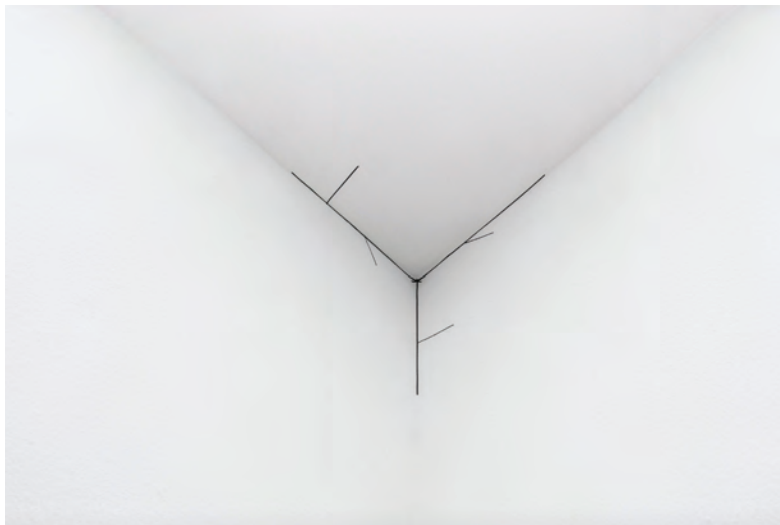
Illusion and reality, surface and depth - this is the language not only of symbolic representations of the Domestic Interior but also of certain Modernist forms of abstraction that are based on the Domestic Interior theme. Thus Jean Welz's beautiful - and enigmatic - *Matisse's Model* [Figure 65] plays with the nature of representation and the relationship between intellectual and sensory perception. However real, and appreciative of the naked female form, this painting appears to be, it is actually based on Brassai's photograph of Matisse painting a model and is thus effectively an illusion of an illusion. Moreover, the major form in the supposed background of this figure is the further fiction of a painting of a landscape with figures so that the entire composition is a sustained play on the relationship between illusion and reality: the only thing that is 'real' in this painting is the interior in which these features are situated - and there is little sign that this space actually exists.

In the Introduction, it was suggested that, like *Still Life*, the Domestic Interior, particularly the artist's own studio, lends itself to the formal elaboration of abstract compositions on the surface of the painting. In these Modernist works, countless equivalents for three-dimensional form were elaborated: in *Still Life*, painters sought equivalents for mass and volume; and in Domestic Interiors, they sought to convey the sense of architectural enclosure.

Alternatively, in works such as Lawrence Gowing's *Sketch of an Interior* [Figure 66], they sought to render the atmosphere, the sense of a space in virtually abstract terms. In *The Black Hole Universe, Chapter 2, Scene 2, Berlin 2010* [Figure 67], Zander Blom provocatively uses the indexical medium of photography to stretch graphic means of representing an enclosed space to their utmost, demanding that viewers bring their knowledge of spatial articulation to provide any sense of three-dimensional illusion. This capricious nature of abstraction - like theatre, like allegory - allowed artists to create new realities out of familiar domestic scenes: in his *Interior with Monochrome* screenprint [Figure 68], the British Pop artist Richard Hamilton took his cue from Gerrit Rietveld's constructivist-like *Red and Blue Chair* (1917) to playfully de-construct a banal interior space through which he then scattered meaningless colour swatches to create a random, arbitrary fantasy of the Domestic Interior in today's world.



66. Lawrence Gowing (1918-1998), *Sketch of an Interior*, 1942, oil on plywood, 25.6 x 30.5cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 769.



67. Zander Blom (b1982), *The Black Hole Universe, Chapter 2, Scene 041, Berlin*, 2010, C-Print on metallic gloss paper, 53 x 79.5cm, New Church Museum.



68. Richard Hamilton (1922-2011), *Interior with monochrome*, 1979, collotype screenprint, 49.9 x 70cm, Iziko South African National Gallery 80/8.

Conclusion

While title to a home is generally understood as a fundamental human right, Jon Riordan's *Signs of Life* series and David Southwood's *Victoria Mxenge TT* photograph [Figures 2 & 3], with which this project opened, demonstrate that it is certainly not universal. Neither are the homes that are explored as Domestic Interiors in this exhibition inevitable. As human constructions, both as physical shelter and as expressions of the values of their occupants, they can easily be transformed and even destroyed. Enslin du Plessis's *Bombed Interior* [Figure 69] shows the destruction in World War II of a London home, perhaps even the same home whose comfort and taste the artist had so lovingly recorded in *Interior: Sitting Room at Mecklenbergh Square* [Figure 6]. And in Sue Williamson's *Last Supper, Manley Villa*, from her series on District 6 [Figure 70], the external enemy is replaced by an internal aggressor in an outrageous act of an undeclared civil war. The sense of destruction in these two scenes – of property, of lifestyle, – in a real sense, of civilization – represents a sort of *Memento Mori*, a warning that these expressions of basic human needs are also part of history and that they, like the human body itself, will sooner or later return to dust. But Jon Riordan's *Signs of Life* series illustrates a sort of resurrection of the same District 6 whose destruction Sue Williamson had documented earlier; and Guy Tillim's *Destroyed Apartment Block, Kuito, Angola* [Figure 71] bears witness to the determination of the human spirit to survive in unimaginable domestic circumstances. As Mario Praz, lamenting the destruction of Italy in the Second World War, wrote in *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration from Pompeii to Art Nouveau*:

The houses will rise again, and men will furnish houses as long as there is breath in them. Just as our primitive ancestor built a shapeless chair with hastily-chopped branches, so the last man will save from the rubble a stool or a tree stump on which to rest from his labours; and if his spirit is freed for a while from his woes, he will linger another moment and decorate his room.



69. Enslin du Plessis (1894-1978), *Bombed Interior*, c1942, oil on plywood, 60 x 47cm, Stellenbosch University Museum 1990/017.



70. Sue Williamson (b1941), *Last Supper, Manley Villa*, 1981/2008, archival print on cotton rag, 50 x 67.5cm, New Church Museum.



71. Guy Tillim (b1962), *Apartment Block, Kuito, Angola*, 2000, archival print on paper, 31.3 x 47.8cm, Private Collection, Cape Town.

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And to the artists who variously put me in touch with owners of their works, helped me track them down, or lent their own works, I am truly grateful to be able to include your work in this collection. I think particularly of Lien Botha, Thuli Gamedze, David Goldblatt, Andries Gouws, Ian Grose, Nomusa Makhubu, Kutlwano Moagi, Jon Riordan and David Southwood: thanks to David Southwood also for the photography. I am grateful also for the trouble you have taken to communicate, in correspondence or conversation, your understanding of your work, and its relevance in society at this time. Thank you.

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Select Further Reading

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Michael Godby is Emeritus Professor of History of Art at the University of Cape Town. He received his BA from Trinity College, Dublin, his MA from the University of Birmingham, and his PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand. He has published and lectured on Early Renaissance Art, English Eighteenth-century Art, particularly William Hogarth, Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century South African Art, and the History of South African Photography. Following *Is there Still Life? Continuity and Change in South African Still Life Painting* (2007) and *The Lie of the Land: Representations of the South African Landscape* (2010), *Home Truths* is the third exhibition he has curated in conjunction with Iziko South African National Gallery. He is currently preparing a collection of papers for a book on the History of Photography in South Africa; and co-editing a collection of letters from Irma Stern to Richard and Frieda Feldman.

The Domestic Interior has featured prominently in schools of art as diverse as the Dutch 17th century, French and English 19th and 20th century art, and 20th and 21st century South African art and photography – and includes some of the most beautiful and affecting works of the Western tradition. But Interiors have also acted as the stage for a whole variety of domestic dramas. This selection of works is drawn from public and private collections in South Africa and is grouped into four parts: 'Interior Worlds', that in expressing their owners' identity also function as alternative realities to the external world; 'Behind Closed Doors', spaces that afford privacy for private feelings and private deeds; 'The World Outside', that defines the nature of the interior space through contrast, and represents both a threat to that space but also the possibility of an escape from it; and 'Inside Out' in which the symbolic potential of the Domestic Interior is explored. The essays and the many reproductions in this book illustrate the huge richness of the Domestic Interior – and offer suggestions for understanding one's own place in relation to its underlying themes of security, comfort and some form of individuation.

