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The SASA Gallery supports a program of exhibitions focusing on innovation, experimentation and performance. With the support of the Division of Education, Art and Social Sciences, the SASA Gallery is being developed as a leading contemporary art space and as an active site of teaching and learning. The SASA Gallery showcases South Australian artists, designers, architects, writers and curators associated with the School of Art, Architecture and Design, University of South Australia, in a national and international context. The Director, SASA Gallery, would like to acknowledge the contribution to the development of the 2012 exhibition program by the SASA Gallery Programming Committee; Professor Kay Lawrence; Professor Mads Gaardboe, Head, AAD; and Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Pro-Vice Chancellor, DIVEASS, UniSA.

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Curator: Lisa Harms
Artists: Morgan Allender, Sally Arnold, Nic Brown, Cathy Frawley, Sasha Grbich, Lisa Harms, Elizabeth Hetzel, Alessandra Tomeo and Kaylie Weir
External Scholar: Lisa Gorton, poet

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Images:
Front: Sasha Grbich, *First the deluge*, 2012
Back: Nic Brown, *breeding doilies* (work in progress) (detail), 2012, doilies, chair, 91 h x 117 w x 78 d cm

conversations in ellipsis

31 July - 24 August 2012

SASA GALLERY

ROOM AND BELL

Lisa Gorton

i.

Any familiar place, the moment before it takes shape in our mind, rises to thought as a circle formed around us. That moment, we know it not as a place, not even as a memory; but as though some ghost of the future had whispered in our ear, 'Here you are', and permitted us to glimpse in that moment the place as it will be when it exists only by our haunting. This dreamt-up room, this O, which builds itself out of fragments, out of a configuration of shadows, in which we can no longer distinguish between memories and objects, in which the very skirting boards and armchairs, as they assume their shapes, appear to us still in the unreal light of that first moment – it is by this that we enter into the experience of images, and every image returns to us this room, where the work of remembering is so nearly a work of forgetting that it rises each time as if from the time before it ever was, just as the bell that I kept to hand through that long childhood illness drew its power from the rift between my room and the world.

ii.

I rang the bell and they came. The bell was made of brass cast in the figure of a woman dressed in crinoline. Straight-backed, arms akimbo: with her hair in a topknot, her breasts like elbows, she had always the look of someone preparing a rebuke. Her body fitted the crease of my palm. Only when I lifted her from the shelf, I saw how helplessly her legs, swing-jointed at the hips, jigged against her skirts. Swinging her side-to-side, I felt how that humiliation would nourish in her a longing to make the world wait upon a small room. I rang the bell and they came: one of my brothers perhaps – more likely, my sister or my mother. Memory recasts them as figures so tall they had to bow their heads to step into the room. Coming to the door, they had the light behind them. They cast the long shadows of the world across my carpet. Their annoyance did not disturb me. It proved the power of my bell, which had summoned them against their will from the midst of days.

iii.

Whatever time they came to the door, they had the light behind them. My room was planted in the shade of an ornamental pear tree. The tree is there still, though the room has gone. Even as I write this, its green light builds itself around me; again its glass-grey leaf-shadows advance from the wall behind my bed onto the ceiling. They turn over in the wind: a motion so closely resembling the sound of slow-running water that as I watch them I hear again the stream that flowed once where now our garden is, whose imaginary sound underran all my hours in that room, much as a longing for sleep underruns thought on a long drive.

iv.

That room has gone, the wall knocked out to extend the living room. Now a sofa rests against the wall where my bed was.

I settle there when I visit my mother's house. Every familiar place has this more intimate architecture: these configurations of memory, which build our shelter within the shelter of a house. To discover this more intimate architecture, we need only step blindfold through the door. At once the house builds itself around us, not as rooms and not equally, but as habits belonging to left and right, to close and farther off. The true translation of our experience of a house would be: the place where I go between; the place of being careful; the place where I hid once behind the chair (the place of skirting boards); the place built about a trapdoor that each night drops me through the floor of my own being …

v.

Just as there are three primary colours, of which other colours are made, so there are three primary places, which make up our experience of space: the bedroom, the hallway and the living room. We could equally say: the cubby, the side of the house, the park. The bedroom is the first, the enclosed place: so familiar we have stopped seeing it. We will never live in it as fully as it lives in us. Snow domes, storm glasses, music boxes: these alike awaken in us the consciousness of close, small things. In these, we recover the experience of reading in bed at night when, wrapped in secrecy as much as warmth, our feeling of safety is built up out of the dread of turning off the light and confronting again the shadows of the wardrobe – for these places have not the set dimensions of walls.

As soon as we have made our nook under the sheets, the bedroom is as free of us as hallways. By this trick, the room that all day lent its shape to our longing for solitude now harbours crocodiles under the bed.

vi.

In this architecture, which is built in us, there is no part so unpossessed as hallways, which must be hung with etchings and reproductions, with landscapes constructed upon a vanishing point. No domestic interior can work there, no picture of a woman reading – for see how ill at ease she looks! She wants to read to the end of the chapter; she keeps glancing at her watch. Soon it will be time to collect the children; she has not yet started on the ironing or hung the washing out … Now the light of the doorway throws a bright blank onto the picture glass, a skewed rectangle in which your shadow floats, reduced to the scale of that room and yet stopped at the edge of it; now the woman closes her book and walks through the door that you have opened into her tasks.

vii.

Whenever we are ironing, we enter that existence in which we are always ironing. With a flourish of steam, as from a magician's sleeve, that world is conjured, in which we stand like the god of an old philosophy, taking matter into our hands and giving it form. To our right, the clothes are massed.

Taken singly, clothes may be haunted; taken together they are only stained. The black of them is always rusted; always dust spins up from them through angled light. Under our hands, under the iron, which in its blind, nosing progress is the votive of our patience, the clothes are drawn, one by one, into the world. There they wait on hangers: next week on the calendar.

viii.

These places have not the set dimensions of walls; they open and close around us with any trick of light. Late afternoon, winter: the sun's angled yellow rays bring out the green of the Norfolk pine tree; we seek in its shadow that blue we know it has at noon. The pine tree's shadow, which is permanent, shuts in a piece of ground, a shelter; but no thing can take root there. We see the self-closed shadow from a distance and think to stop there; stopping there, we are uneasy: it has, after all, the unpossessed nature of a hallway. Just as the combination of blue and yellow is most striking against red, it is the combination of opposites that makes place visible to us again. The tree house, which sets a cubby inside the living room of leaves; the back seat of a car at night, where a self-closed world is broken open by each freeway light; the side entrance, which even as it opens the door to you recalls the secret sides of houses, where only ivy thrives …

ix.

In my memory it is always raining when we drive at night, when, motionless at my window, I see the world open and close around me light by light. Now the rain-bright verge, rust-weed lit brokenly among the stones; now streaks of rain on my window-glass; now those driftnets our headlights loose into the low paddocks; now the windscreen wipers, beating off the dark – I am reading, advancing through the story light by light. (Now the rain-bright verge.) On the page, my hand, my sister's face alike the light is marred with glass-grey rain-shadows, each with its hairline crack of light. (Now streaks of rain on my window-glass.) One of these rain-shadow breaks on the page and the light runs out. (Now those driftnets our headlights loose into the low paddocks.) Sentence by sentence, light by light – steps so faltering slow that even as I sit in the dark of the car, it is day and I am going after my sister over the rocks (how does she go over these rocks so fast?). Out to our left, the sea is tipping sideways like a tray (remember when you dropped the tray?) and waves slide down it, glasses breaking one by one in an accident's dumb-founded slow motion. Sentence by sentence, light by light – (Now the windscreen wipers, beating off the dark.)