

IDYLL: TORI BEECHE, GAVIN CHAI, BRUNELLE DIAS 16 JUN – 9 JUL 2022

"In the particular is contained the universal." — James Joyce

It's almost impossible to look at an image of an interior without being able to relate to it. At the very least, we all know what it's like to be inside a building. In *Idyll*, the paintings of Tori Beeche, Gavin Chai, and Brunelle Dias interrogate the universality of inside-ness through the specificity of domestic interiors.

The idyll and the idyllic are most often associated with the picturesque pastoral and outdoor Edens. But what of idyllic interiors? The association between the idyll and outside-ness is based on an incorrect remembering of the writing of 3rd century BCE Greek poet Theocritus. Theocritus has become the grandfather of the pastoral literary tradition through his collection of thirty poems entitled *Idylls*, from the Greek word 'eidyllion', meaning little picture. Although they are often remembered exclusively as stories of rural scenes, there are three urban *Idylls* in the collection, each following a short narrative of life in the metropolis of Alexandria, where Theocritus himself lived.

In *Idyll 15, The Women at the Adonis Festival*, Gorgo visits her friend, Praxinoa, at her new Alexandrian home. Praxinoa laments to Gorgo that her husband chose their house "at the end of the world, and more an animal's den, too, than a place of a human being to live in, just to prevent you and me being neighbours, out of sheer spite..." The pair journey into the bustling city to revel in the urbane pleasure of the Adonis Festival. Theocritus' poems paint short-storied pictures of contemporary life, this simple *Idyll* reflecting the connection and disconnection that can be propelled by our surroundings. Working through paint instead of dialogue, Beeche, Chai, and Dias similarly engage with the vernacular to capture that duality of experience.

Beeche's practice draws on Northern European genre painting. Genre paintings focus on scenes of everyday life with people depicted carrying out common activities, often within domestic spaces. It emerged as a newly wealthy middle class looked for small artworks to furnish their homes. In genre painting, they found a reflection of their world. Key to this mirroring were the interior spaces, described in exacting detail, filled with the accoutrements of domestic life— cups, bowls, utensils and food, furniture and instruments, clothes, and textiles. These specific details functioned to render the scenes familiar to the viewers and reflect the homes in which the paintings were hung.

Beeche harnesses similar specificity in the pursuit of familiarity. Removing figures from her interior spaces, their accoutrements and embellishments become both setting and protagonist. The paintings of the empty spaces might be uncanny if they weren't so joyful in their descriptions of texture and pattern. Attention to key decorative features in her compositions, *Alma Zucchini* for example, the birds eye view of a stairwell and a landing is distorted, and the stairs appear to hover unanchored, suspended by the decorative wallpaper alone. Beeche's paintings look like how it feels to remember interior spaces, all snapshots and close ups of the details that stand out in memories. The palatial cavern in *Merlin Caskie* is adorned by the

suggestion of intricate patterns, but between the curving wall panels and the floor mosaic, the interior is constructed with bands of flat colour. Like the patchwork that is remembering, the specific detail sits beside areas that are unremembered, space that fills in the blanks.

In Gavin Chai's interiors, there are no blanks. His scenes and spaces are rendered in exquisite detail, an inheritance from the masters of the Italian and Northern Renaissance and the Baroque period. His homage to painters like Piero Della Francesca oscillates between the explicit and the implicit. *Interior 51* represents the greatest likeness to Della Francesca's work, *The Baptism of Christ* c. 1448 to 1450. While there is a painting hung on the far wall of a baptism, the semi-circular window that frames a dove in flight seems to be the most direct link to Della Francesca's domed composition. In Chai's rendition, John the Baptist's tentative baptism of Jesus is replaced with a figure, perhaps Chai himself, splayed out in a pool, buoyed by its translucent water. Instead of shackling himself to the traditions of renaissance painting, he uses their devices in a playful way, volleying with the masters rather than being dictated to; he uses their linear perspective to tile a chequerboard floor as well as a beachball and an air conditioning unit.

Though his admiration of this era's technical mastery is clear, Chai is most enamoured with painting's ability to "communicate a thousand words without needing to utter one single word, compressing a complex story into one single frame."¹ The artists of the Renaissance utilised a vernacular pictorial language, using symbols that had widely known meanings to communicate complicated biblical narratives. In *Interior 44*, a swathe of sunlight fills a nondescript, almost empty room, illuminating not a saint or a scene from the bible, but a butterfly, a dustpan, and a brush. The butterfly, an established symbol of rebirth and transformation, hovers above the blue plastic dustpan and brush pair rendering them as a sign and symbol from our contemporary times. A familiar and overlooked object, almost every household has a similar dustpan and brush but here, in the empty room, accompanied by its rebirthed friend, the set may symbolise a cleaning up and reminds me of the last once over given to a room just before moving out of a home or a flat. The room then, is perhaps recently empty. The warm sunlight that bathes the room with a tactile warmth indicates that this is not an unhappy departure. By placing us in the doorway, with the sun on our backs, Chai's iconography suggests that moving out of old spaces and into new ones is an opportunity for rebirth.

Unlike Beeche and Chai, dias' works focus on the habitation of interior spaces, rather than the interior itself. There is just enough detail to indicate that the scene takes place in a domestic space, but the interior recedes into the background, while the small actions and unspoken connections between the figures are foregrounded. In her Master's thesis, "introspective fieldworks; the everyday in flux", dias explained that "interconnection can be loudly felt through small gestures."² In *transient village*, she uses the subtlety of posture and gesture, a forehead creased in concentration, the arch of a be-socked foot. dias' paintings have the ability to lure you into these small details blown up large and swallow you whole. By taking this fleeting scene and enlarging it beyond life-size, dias submerges us in these small details and refuses to let us dismiss them as unimportant.

Looking at *transient village*, I'm reminded of the countless photographs I have on my phone of nothing in particular except people I love being in the same room. A bleeding heart sentimental, every one of those photographs was taken because I wanted a memento of how it felt to spend time and share space. Those photographs capture some of the most banal moments of my life and I will cherish them forever. The unstretched canvas feels like these fleeting scenes and spaces could have been torn right out of dias' mind's eye. In dias' paintings I see, and feel, a

¹ Fox, Rebecca. "Past Master." Otago Daily Times. August 5, 2021.

² dias, brunelle. "Introspective Fieldworks; the Everyday in Flux." 2021, 64.

similar love letter to moments of what dias calls ordinary intimacy³. In *r + v*, something as specific as the way her friends hold themselves while they're in the midst of conversation, reminds me of the slouched moments I've had on the couch with my own beloved people. dias reminds us that these small moments of intimacy and closeness are what make up big relationships, even if they have faded into the category of things you perceive without note. The small moments and small details that would not be remembered except that they have.

Though the interiors depicted are specific to Beeche, Chai and dias' points of view and expressions, they can't help but trigger my own memories of inside-ness. The idyllic interior is engulfed by the big and small of the moments they house. They are the stage for remembering and nostalgia. They absorb this charged energy, and in the case of these paintings, they hold on to them, waiting to be the fertile ground for more and other reminiscences.

Text by Erin Lee

³ dias, 64.