

## Dressed like a set

ANNE WALLACE'S DOMESTIC SCENARIOS ARE SUSPENDED SOMEWHERE BETWEEN OBSERVATION AND ACCUSATION, WRITES EDWARD COLLESS.



A naked man stands in the doorway onto a balcony or maybe a patio, stretching and yawning contentedly as if having just dragged himself from a hotel bed still warm and imprinted with last night's sex. He's gazing out lethargically at an overexposed morning world that seems indifferent to his careless nudity; or that, at least, he has little concern for. There could be an empty beach in front of him. There could be a busy city street below him. It might even be a suburban house he's found himself waking up in, and he's vacantly scanning the backyard pool, the dog house, the carport, the kid with a skateboard who is waiting for his mother to drive him to school.

Whatever it is this man sees, and which we can never see or even get a hint of, it doesn't matter to him. He is shamelessly unaware and uninterested. Nonchalant in the subtle arrogance of someone who silently believes he has rightly got what he deserves; and that whoever got him last night got a good deal. This is a self-congratulatory rather than an innocent nakedness. It's like the acknowledgment of a birthright; maybe attractive in its confidence as well as simply ridiculous. This picture of him is a double take, a kind of blurry superimposition of desire and apathy.

Pretty but dumb. Because what he doesn't see is that he's being spied on from a position alongside the world that he dismisses. It's the position, possibly, of a lover who's waiting outside in the morning for their man's appearance and who enjoys this unsolicited erotic opportunity. Or maybe – and equally plausible – it's an insanely jealous, homicidal, accusatory stare of someone who's been waiting all night for evidence of their suspicions. *Love Nest*: this scene is both sweet and sinister, a hideaway and a trap. On one hand, we have a tender glimpse framed by a lushly feminine plant with, at the same height as the man's face, a single hibiscus blossom on it receptively spread open and cheekily poking out its tongue. Cute. Sexy. But on the other hand, this image is a paparazzi snapshot cutting obliquely through the branches of a tree in the foreground that takes on the appearance of a hysterical stick figure, mimicking with gothic agitation – or maybe even trying to warn – the human figure standing next to it. The scene of the crime.

Anne Wallace's paintings are almost always suspended in this kind of double take and ambivalence between observation and accusation. It's not just that the stories implied in scenes such as *Love Nest* are intentionally obscured by misleading clues. It may be an initial impression, but we don't really play that kind of hide'n'seek game with her work for long. It doesn't lead anywhere. Admittedly, Wallace admires detective fiction (Raymond Chandler's novels in particular), and the scenery in her tableaux has an aura of mystery and domestic intrigue – to an almost forensic degree – that could have been appropriated from 1940s and 50s *film noir* or melodrama. But the inexplicable and possibly unreal menace that Wallace embeds in mundane household and familial events seems far more like the sort of cruel anticipation of danger we enjoy in contemporary horror movies, in genres like the college dorm splatter or slasher films. "I don't read crime fiction that much now," Wallace points out. "I often have Stephen King in mind."

The amoral violence in splatter and slasher films actually incubates in a simple, lucid logic. No matter how weirdly twisted and murky the demonic killers might be, these characters aren't deeply, neurotically conflicted. That's to say, the horror isn't prompted by those richly prohibited oedipal occupations behind melodrama, such as incest. Splatter violence is instead motivated by a psychotic pathology so removed from psychological or social explanation that it is effectively alien or supernatural. It is the crystalline, dispassionate and undeviating rationale of ludicrous ultra-violence that is actually the frightening thing in these movies. And evil logic like this depends on the self-evidence of the generic features of the scenario, so much so that each film will seem to be a parody of the genre. The teenagers at the slumber party in Wes Craven's slasher movie *Scream* warn each other that if they have sex they will be hideously murdered because that is what happens in every slasher movie to teenagers who have sex at a slumber party.

It's just this kind of generic, unexpressive and even slightly parodic, self-consciously classical treatment of her scenes that Wallace has diligently insisted on throughout the 12 years or so that she has been exhibiting. "When I started art school in Brisbane in 1988, I originally wanted to do book illustration, children's books," she says, "and William Robinson steered me toward painting ... conservative, old fashioned figurative painting ... and particularly toward the sort of semi-illustrative style in Balthus's work." Wallace's early work was inspired by the unsettling, edgy rigour of Balthus's style in depicting intense but undemonstrative emotional states. Her statuesque figures are often arranged in suggestively ritualistic, domestic scenarios that seem airless, or in which the atmosphere has congealed into a heavily silent, anaesthetising ether. These were evidently understated allegories of suburban family life. "A lot of that work was about the tedium of being young in Brisbane and waiting for life to happen", Wallace explains. "At the base of it were these connected questions: how do you start to live, and to paint? And

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Anne Wallace, *Love Nest*, 2001. Oil on linen, 111 x 136cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

there was despair in that. Well, I wanted to get out. I applied for the Samstag Scholarship and did two years in London at the Slade."

For anyone clued into the emerging Brit Pop phenomenon in the mid 90s, the Slade might have seemed an odd choice as a destination for a young artist wanting to break out. A conservative, traditionalist school, occupied by a 1960s generation of British abstract painters. Wallace chose it hoping for in-depth study of oil techniques, such as glazing, by some eccentric and anachronistic maestro. "Unfortunately, no", she says. But the environment appears to have boosted another aspect of her style: the flatter, poster-like effect of colour abstraction that has thinned out her space even more and reduced brushwork to a thin unmarked or unaccented skin that has had its texture stretched out, almost like plastic surgery on a Beverley Hills face. This renders the action and emotion of her figures less distinct, but also creepily dispassionate. "When I look back," she explains, "I now feel that Balthus was rather tame."

The surface of the world in Wallace's paintings seems not just clean but also unused. You can't help but feel that there is a repression of the dirt, whether as facial character or as narrative incident. Even when there is an accident – a bottle of Noilly Prat on its side on a glass topped coffee table, with its contents pouring onto a redwood floor – it looks as if the domestic incident behind this image is inaccessible, unreadable, or maybe what we presume has occurred hasn't happened at all. We could say her scenes look posed, as if for a modernist fashion photo with a clean, slick, uncluttered space arranged for the view. Dressed like a set. In other words, we could say that the objects and even characters all seem like props, almost in the way that de Chirico's scenes are arranged. There seems to be an enigma, not only because Wallace effaces whatever the domestic incident might be that the painting

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Anne Wallace, *Martha*, 2003. Oil on linen, 78 x 107cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST.

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appears to illustrate (or be the consequence of), but also because the composition forms a type of glyph, an untimely mystery that in de Chirico's idiom could be called "metaphysical". Yet, this is a world without transcendent values. No metaphysics, no surreality.

What's left in such a world? "I went to Nimbin on the weekend," Wallace casually mentions. "The addicts were particularly scary looking. Someone could make a great zombie film up there just by training the camera on the main street for a couple of hours." Perhaps that's what this world of hers becomes. The living dead: a phantasm of its own extinction, as if staged for a movie. This

is the way reality TV identifies the world's psychotic double. Surprisingly perhaps, Wallace's paintings depict love's labours in the way that a splatter movie utilises teen sex: as the occasion to induce a psychotic demon. She has seen these zombies well before her last trip to Nimbin. In her painting *Martha*, a woman in a long dress with high heels is kneeling beside a luxurious enamel bath in an immaculately clean bathroom, with her head and arms hidden inside the tub as if she is unaccountably cleaning it just before her guests arrive for cocktails. Maybe this is some sort of hysterical, self-punishing and compulsive behaviour. Or maybe it is a masochistic ritual, overseen by an absent master or a dominatrix imperiously standing in the doorway. Perhaps it's just an innocent domestic chore, left a little late in the day. "When my mother saw that painting," says Wallace, "she thought the woman was drowning a child!" If she is drowning a child, then she is doing it with the same calm resolve with which she might clean the bath, or submit to a dominatrix, or scrub repetitively till her fingers bleed. And, so, if she is doing any of these things, she is capable of doing all of them. Isn't that a scary thought? ■

Anne Wallace's next exhibition is at Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney from 6 July to 31 July 2004.