



Callum Morton: Interior World

THE PRISTINE WORLD OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IS THREATENED BY THE REINTRODUCTION OF HUMAN PRESENCE IN CALLUM MORTON'S MODELS.

EDWARD COLLESS UNCOVERS
THE CORRUPTION
WITHIN.

Callum Morton's studio is a comfortably large area within an old, low slung factory that takes up the better part of a block in Melbourne's inner west. But during the last stage in the assembly of his new work, *Habitat*, there's not much room left in there for his team of workers.

Habitat is an enormous project, the most intricate and labour-intensive sculpture that Morton has produced, and it's on its way to the Project Space of the National Gallery of Victoria, in Federation Square (where it is on show from June through mid August). Stretching almost seven metres in length across six work tables, this is a 1:50 scale model of a famous community housing block designed by Moshe Safdie for Montreal's Expo 67. Safdie's *Habitat* was a visionary building in its time. A "plug-in" city with each of its three hundred apartments a self-contained and prefabricated module, stacked and interlocked in what must have seemed back then to be an eccentric, Lego-like mosaic that could conceivably be extended forever. After Expo, this project for affordable mass housing fell into disrepute, reduced to an emblem of the failed utopianism of modernist architecture. That is until recently, when its reputation recovered – being featured in *Wallpaper* magazine. It's now among the hippest, most exclusive addresses in Montreal.

Morton's model does justice to the complexity of the original architectural concept. Six months in the making, his sculpture was initially plotted out in detail in a computer 3D modelling program, based accurately on the architect's plans. This virtual model sits on screen on a computer stowed amidst tins of paint and glue in the studio. Each component of the computer model can independently rotate 360 degrees. But that's not just a piece of eye candy. It's an essential tool in fabricating the actual construction, which is made from thousands of small laser-cut pieces of wood and perspex that have to fit together like pieces of a huge three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. The surface result, as with all of Morton's models, is immaculate and impeccable.

Of course, no matter how elaborate and spectacular its production, *Habitat* is not really an architectural model. It's more like a huge robotic toy, with invisible yuppie inhabitants who live out a programmed self-destructive routine in perpetual replay. Through strategically located miniature speakers inside its Lilliputian apartments, the multichannel soundtrack for a day in the life of this sanitary and sterile world illuminates a hilariously dirty, anxiety-ridden and sadomasochistic interior world. Morton scales down the duration of this soundtrack by the same ratio as the measurements of the model, reducing 24 hours to 28 minutes, a bit like hitting fast-forward on *The Sims*. In the mornings we hear doors opening and slamming, and feet shuffling in the rush to work. In the evenings the sounds of TV are interspersed with occasional arguments. As we get deeper into the night, the incidental sounds of sleep mutate into a medley of increasing horror movie fantasy: lonely cries, howling wind, rattling chains, and a bloodcurdling scream. But by next morning, everything is quiet again, apart from the building's soft mechanical hum as if it is automatically laundering or vacuuming up the residue of its nightmares. The yuppies' night terrors – or night crimes – become habitual and routine.

Callum Morton's architectural models are a bit like Pandora's boxes: exquisite enclosures harbouring delicious evil and violence. For the Melbourne Biennial of 1999, he produced a scale model of Mies van der Rohe's elegant Farnsworth House (designed between 1945-51): a crystalline glass structure, which has the minimalist purity and poise of an archaic temple. With moody interior lighting glowing warmly through the house's ceiling to floor curtains, we feel locked out in the cold night of the darkened gallery, hearing the bubbly sounds of a cosy, sophisticated cocktail party inside the house. But flirtatious conversation turns to argument and then threat. "Don't you dare touch me!" shouts a female from somewhere in the house. A series of gunshots ring out as the blasts flash behind the curtains. The party guests go silent in shock, and then, callously, indifferent to whatever tragedy has just occurred, they



Callum Morton, *Casa Spizzico, Capri*, 2001.
Digital print, edition of 30, 59 x 84cm.
COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY GALLERY.

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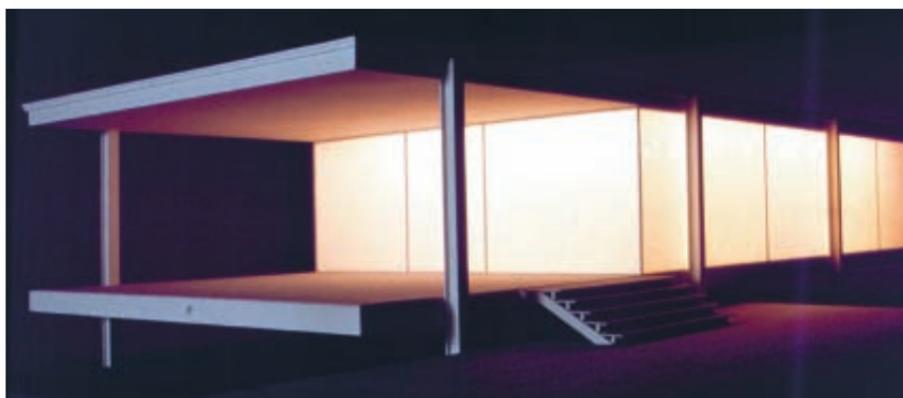


Above left: Callum Morton, *Oh Bridget*, 2001. Wood, plastic, styrofoam, perspex, lights and soundscape, 170 x 110 x 130cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY.

Above right: Callum Morton, *Gas and Fuel*, 2002. Wood, acrylic paint, aluminium, perspex, paper, sound, 220 x 91 x 600cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY.

Right: Callum Morton, *International Style*, 1999. Acrylic, wood, lights, sound, dimensions variable. COURTESY: ROSLYN OXLEY9 GALLERY.

Opposite page: Callum Morton working on *Habitat*. PHOTO: KIRSTIN GOLLINGS.



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start mumbling and then chatting and flirting as they get back into the spirit of the evening, until it happens all over again. This explosion of violence seems to be part of the entertainment, a hellish repetition of excess and privilege. And while the cool exterior of the house remains inscrutable we see that the slick finesse of the *International Style*, as this work is called, conceals a dirty secret.

"It seems like I take months to make something beautiful and clean... a pure object," explains Morton, "and then, in a week in the sound studio, I find a way of corrupting that object." This sort of infection of pure appearance can be histrionic and extravagant or subtle and sly. *Cellar*, for instance, was a slightly scaled down version of a pair of rickety cellar doors chained and padlocked shut, on the floor of the gallery. This is the sort of cellar in which something nasty has been locked up, and is just waiting for you to get too close. Then, triggered by a hidden sensor, the beast growls and rants and rattles the gates of its prison. Far from this Luna Park style of surprise attack, *Gas and Fuel*, a two metre high model of a well known 1950s Melbourne office block, sat quietly and with regal gravity alone in a tomb-like atmosphere in Anna Schwartz's gallery last year. That is, until one noticed a tiny, high pitched voice plaintively and ineffectually calling for help from somewhere inside the building. This lonely, diminutive plea was derived from the soundtrack of the 1958 movie, *The Fly*, in which a mutant fly with a tiny human head cries for help in terror as a monstrous spider, in whose web the fly is caught, descends on it. *Gas and Fuel* is a model of the Gas and Fuel Building, considered a sentimental eyesore by many, which was recently demolished to make way for Federation Square. Is this disturbingly forsaken cry the voice of a forgotten, final occupant locked inside? Or is it the building itself, pleading to be rescued from its imminent death.

The enigmatic cry of *Gas and Fuel* was performed by Callum Morton's own voice; and there's definitely a degree of personal identification, if not ironic portrayal, in many of his games with famous, or infamous, architectural icons. *Habitat* has a special significance. Morton's parents had moved to Montreal in the mid 1960s when his father, an architect, landed a job working for a project in Moshe Safdie's office. That project was *Habitat*. Callum was born during this time. "In a way," he admits, "this building seems to have something to do with my own existence." The family moved back to Australia in 1968; the year, Morton declares, "when



everything changes." Mass political and social protests flared up on an unprecedented international scale throughout that year, inspired variously by Marxism, Maoism, or anarchism, and attaining their celebrated form in the Paris riots of May '68. "After 1968," says Morton, "the utopian social ideals of technological megastructures like *Habitat* collapsed with the emergence of a politics of everyday life."

Back in Australia, Morton studied urban planning and architecture, before deciding on a career as an artist. "I noticed that the paradigm of modernist architectural photography," he says, "is the absence of people: the presence of everyday people corrupts the pristine form of the architecture. So, as an artist, I put them back into the buildings." And there may be a mischievous mentor for this reinvestment of human presence in a depopulated, phantasmatic architecture: performance artist (now architect) Vito Acconci's notorious *Seed Bed*. Picture this: standing in an apparently empty gallery room, one gradually heard the muffled sounds of the artist crawling around beneath the perfectly finished false floor, while he masturbated. An eruption of the dark unconscious, of a corrupting desire, from beneath the floorboards of the modernist white cube.

"The sounds that come from these works," says Morton of his models, "come from the nasty interiors of modernism." The interior is where the bad stuff goes down. The interior is the scene where local detail flourishes, whether subcultural or topographical. It's the stuff of domestic chores as well as domestic sex-fantasies in spotless, white kitchens. It's the necrophile's sighs of pleasure in the sanitised hospital mortuary. It's the suburbs lurking behind the smiley face of a city's tourism sights. The interior will sound like noise. Or look like dirt. "When I see the clean, slick surfaces of a gas station or transit lounge," Morton continues, "I just know something bad is going to happen. And yet, I'm fascinated by those beautifully reduced surfaces and forms." ■

Callum Morton is represented by Anna Schwartz (Melbourne), Roslyn Oxley9 (Sydney), Karen Lovegrove (Los Angeles), Gimpel Fils (London).

Callum Morton: Habitat is at National Gallery of Victoria 31 May to 17 August 2003 and *Callum Morton: More Talk About Buildings and Mood* is at the Museum of Contemporary Art 22 October 2003 to 26 January 2004.

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