

Model pictures: James Lynch, Amanda Marburg, Rob McHaffie and Moya McKenna

This exhibition takes as its focus the work of four highly regarded younger painters: James Lynch, Amanda Marburg, Rob McHaffie and Moya McKenna. Born in the 1970s, all four artists graduated from the VCA between 1996 and 2002, a time when art was undergoing a critical shift away from the large-scale, epic paintings that had dominated the previous two decades towards object-based art, film, photography and installation.

The influential 1999 Melbourne International Biennial included artists whose work exemplified the Zeitgeist of the turn of the century. 'Model' sculptures by local artists Callum Morton and Ricky Swallow accompanied installations by Maurizio Cattelan, Mariele Neudecker, Ugo Rondinone, and Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. The only canvases included in the central exhibition, *Signs of life*, were Stephen Bush's paintings, described by curator Juliana Engberg as 'a final hoorah for oil painting'.

Internationally in the late 1990s, artists such as Luc Tuymans, Michael Raedecker, Mamma Andersson, Thomas Demand and Jeff Wall were incorporating concepts of 'model culture'—using alternative materials, staged spaces and constructed tableaux—in painting and photography. In Melbourne, artists and art students were circulating ideas from Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational aesthetics* (published in English in 2002), questioning perceptions of the autonomous artist, artwork and audience, and catalysing relationships between physical, social and institutional spaces.

Beginning their careers in this context, Lynch, Marburg, McHaffie and McKenna (and many peers) have taken contemporary painting in Melbourne in a new direction. *Model pictures* follows these artists' careful examination and reworking of ideas and tropes that premise painting as a type of model. They use painting as a diagnostic tool, laboratory, or stage set. Rather than painting things 'from life' as they are in the world, they firstly construct their subjects using dioramas, plasticine maquettes, photography, mannequins and studio still lifes. This exhibition reveals the four artists' different approaches to modelling the world around us. Lynch, Marburg, McHaffie and McKenna choose the scale of their paintings deliberately. They seek new motifs and types of pictorial space that reflect the spaces they themselves inhabit.

James Lynch, who also makes films, animations and installations, uses lightweight cardboard, photographs and other 'soft' materials to construct tabletop-scale tableaux of real and imagined incidents. He then paints from photographs of these staged models. In this way Lynch stabilizes his subject before he begins painting, making visible the basis of how he proceeds. Early works like *Underneath the table ...* and *Melting birthday candles ...* (both 2005) depict friends' earliest memories in a shallow pictorial space populated by an odd community of people and things. The compositional format and varying textures of Lynch's paintings make plain his decision-making, his painterly struggles and pleasures.

A type of 'lowbrow' logic is suggested by **Amanda Marburg's** practice. It empties some of the intensity from painting's history, not unlike artists such as Linda Marrinon. Her method is to build floppy-looking plasticine figures and structures before photographing the tableaux against studio backdrops as a final basis for painting. Marburg is enamoured of expressive painterly ground rules. She has often directed these towards darkly filmic, dramatic *mises-en-scène* such as *Man crawling* and *Sanctuary* (both 2005). Marburg's 'wet' technique gives her images atmospheric volume and depth. The narrative in her pictures is left clipped and open-ended, but the suggestion is of almost-comic accident, misdeeds, and figures—miscreants—living in an inconsequential world.

Rob McHaffie's art involves the most frank and disarming interpretations of what life offers up. His miniature paintings are created working from collages of domestic materials, found objects, magazine cut-outs, or sometimes simple staged dioramas of unusual objects. *Fridge door*, 2007, no more than noticing an amalgam of material pinned to a door, documents the least possible eventful moment. McHaffie's use of 'vacant' white backgrounds, flat surfaces and brilliant colour, carefully applied, conveys the sense of a structure being gently turned over, ever so slightly up-ended, even if for no other reason than needing to see what's underneath.

In her first Melbourne studio, **Moya McKenna** came upon a small white chest of drawers and a pair of cast arms, and began working out still-life arrangements based on this casual find. It was a small step from here for McKenna to conceptually adapt tropes of 'model culture' to a figurative practice. For nearly ten years, she continued to use the cast arms along with other still-life elements as a means towards self-expression, while at the same time translating in paint the connectedness of the arms, as subject, to the wider environment. McKenna initially also imposed a 'time-frame' (usually a single day) on her production of a painting and in so doing created a type of performative space for her canvas, an aspect that continues to conceptually underpin her work.

An illustrated catalogue will be published in March to accompany the exhibition.