

GENERAL STORE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART  
SUITE 201A, 77-83 WILLIAM STREET  
EAST SYDNEY, 2010 AUSTRALIA  
+ 61 (0)414 844 365  
WED-SAT 12-5PM  
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SMARTESQUE SCENE

7-30<sup>TH</sup> OF NOVEMBER 2013  
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JOANNA LAMB, HUW ENGLAND, GARRY PUMFREY, DARREN WARDLE

Undeniably one of the most prominent icons of Australian painting, Jeffrey Smart's career has seen him establish a legacy in contemporary art that draws on the loneliness and beauty, darkness and light, and the cinematic stillness that stems from the familiarity of our urban landscape. *Smartesque Scene* presents the work of four artists - Joanna Lamb, Garry Pumfrey, Darren Wardle and Huw England - who explore cultural, economic and emotive concepts related to contemporary suburbia. Influenced by Smart, their works play off similar subjects and styles to explore how our urban landscape is changing but is still a place of contrasting familiarity and mystery, of harshness and of dreams.

Depictions of industrial wastelands, sprawling concrete streetscapes, deserted highways, and high-rise buildings present what could be seen as the worst of contemporary life, however in his paintings Smart manages to capture a symbolic beauty in these landscapes. With influences from growing up in the Australian landscape as well as living in Italy for a major part of his life, global references run throughout Smart's paintings, through text, symbols and road signs, meaning his work holds relevance not only to Australian suburbia, but also to an international climate of contemporary culture influenced by industrialisation and property development. The architectural geometry of Smart's compositions are complemented with the quality of light - the warmth, humidity and impending drama of stormy skies. Human figures in his landscapes are incorporated only to portray scale and perspective, with the architectural forms and composition taking precedence over narrative or identity. These formal aspects of Smart's work influenced a style of hyper-realism that evokes a contrasting appreciation and exasperation with the contemporary suburban lifestyle. Elements of the everyday make the everyday seem surreal, and these are the aspects of contemporary life that appealed to Smart, and likewise many artists in following generations such as those shown in *Smartesque Scene*.

Western Australian artist Joanna Lamb uses a limited amount of colours to create stylised images that reference the highly composed aesthetics of real-estate advertising. Her geometric compositions focus on buildings such as stadiums and airports, as well as domestic settings of suburban housing, both inside and out.

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Through a systematic methodology she reduces images to only a minimal amount of detail, to make them appear impersonal and vacant: living spaces detached from the reality of living. Almost like monopoly houses, they become more an icon of commercialism, value, and status. The smooth, minimal surface of the works contribute to a distinct lack of human presence and a vast, empty suburban landscape. This flatness relates to feelings that our experience of the suburban lifestyle can sometimes create: the emptiness and repetition of modular living compartments that are all the same. We fill these spaces with our own lives and emotional baggage, but Lamb presents them without a trace of the personal, the emotional, or the human. By doing so, she illustrates a landscape that is constructed by us, for us, and questions how and why we fit our lives into these conventions.

The vibrancy of Darren Wardle's work is also immediately compelling in its bright colour palette and utopian scenes, which present a world in which highly contemporary architectural forms collide with splashes of toxic hyper-colour and stylised brushstrokes. Shifting perspectives within the picture plane create a sense of confusion through which Wardle challenges the contrasting aesthetics and functionality of modernity. The resulting forms entice us through their intensity and richness, much like the modern, contemporary designed home, but in reality these buildings are dysfunctional and often void of human use. Similar to Lamb, Wardle questions the excess aesthetics of consumerism that they represent, resulting in a tension of glamour and perfection that in reality becomes unliveable. The works project an optimism of an imagined future of idealised richness, but these scenes appear more as an element of an imagined future that falls short this utopian dream.

While Lamb and Wardle use vibrancy to amplify the abstract qualities of contemporary suburbia, Pumfrey and England instead explore the darkness that envelops suburban streets to portray the unsettling side of urban landscape. From the commercial and industrial scene of Port Melbourne to the laneways of the old city in Barcelona, Pumfrey depicts street scenes where the objects, shopfronts, and signage give clues to the broader aspects of contemporary lifestyles that surround these suburban streets. Pumfrey's previous works focus on commercial text and advertising graphics that point to the changing economic climate that alters aspects of architectural landscape, such as the decline of the 'corner shop' into increasingly commercial brand names and outlets. His more recent work is influenced by time spent living in Barcelona, and depicts a more sombre city life that only

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reveals itself after dark. These darkened scenes evoke an unsettling feeling like that of walking home alone at night, where the shadows play tricks on us and objects take on new lives, abstracting what would otherwise be familiar. This sense of unease is balanced with the warmth of light and the stillness and quiet, and a beauty in the historic architecture of cobbled laneways merging with traces of the contemporary lives of their current inhabitants. The evidence of human activity such as freshly hosed down streets, piles of abandoned belongings, graffiti, and rubbish bins reveal a gritty, sinister, and more intriguing side of the city that is usually hidden behind the fast paced movement of day.

Huw England also explores the qualities of darkness and artificial light in familiar and mundane surroundings. Based in Sydney, England looks at the play of light on suburban space, through depictions of houses and buildings lit only from within. In minimal architectural spaces, light is thrown from one window or door to direct new compositions of darkness, tones and minimal colour. These light sources turn the darkness into more abstract forms, obscuring parts of the image, with shapes and tonal layering playing out across the surface, again - like Pumfrey - exploring the way spaces become other at night. Single light sources in public and private spaces - houses, apartment building or carparks - create a cinematic quality that suggests a human presence but leaves the narrative open. The results are mysterious and meditative, perhaps evoking the singularity of life within the busy contemporary lifestyles that dominate our daytimes.

The works in *Smartesque Scene* draw on the cultural, economic and personal ramifications of urban landscapes. The works of England, Lamb, Wardle and Pumfrey depict our contemporary lifestyle with a distinct lack of human presence, but by doing so, they explore how our constructed surrounding can sometimes say more about our lives on a subconscious level than we realise. While overly familiar, the landscapes these artists depict speak of other worlds: of utopian dreams, the abstraction of light, and the reduction of our lives to only colours and layers. They explore how commercialism, consumerism, and property investment impact on us by physically shaping our experience and meditation on the world. Like Smart, these artists have been influenced by international experiences and landscapes, and in turn these themes can identify to a global as well as local audience. They evoke an alienation of a lifestyle built around industrialization, however the formal precision of geometric compositions find harmony in these scenes, and define moments of solitude, where we find ourselves enveloped in this industrial sprawl: a pensive contemplation of the constructed world. It is these urban landscapes that

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we roam through everyday, the repetition of suburban houses on suburban streets,  
the familiarity of the local shops, or the abandonment of an empty block at night,  
that are so “normal” they become absurd.

By Anna Madeleine