

## Some Domestic Incidents

An exhibition of new British painting

Curated by Matt Price with Charlie Levine

For most people in the developed world, most of the time, home is a place where we can be at ease – a personal space shared with partners, family and friends. It is a site of sanctuary from the world outside, for everyday activities such as sleeping, cooking a meal, watching a film or raising a family. While many of us are fortunate to live in houses and apartments where we can relax, we all experience things in and around our homes that adversely effect our physical, psychological and emotional relationships with the places in which we live. This might be a burglary, an argument, the death of a loved one, an accident or a visit from the bailiffs. For others, home is a place that is constantly oppressive and filled with melancholy, loneliness or misery – a site of entrapment, discomfort or abuse. *Some Domestic Incidents* presents works by eight artists from Britain that connect to the theme of domesticity and explore how normative relationships with homes can be effected.

Even before graduating with an MA from the Royal College of Art in London in 2009, Caroline Walker focused her attention almost exclusively on domestic environments, depicting furnished yet empty rooms but more often painting women of various ages lying on sofas or the bedroom floor, sitting at their dressing tables or engaged in housework. With her characteristic thin glazes of paint, some of her earliest works were filled with bright colors, though almost always conveyed a subdued atmosphere. Her palette became darker whilst at the RCA, increasingly representing rooms by night, in shade, or with the curtains drawn during the daytime, resulting in more sinister, dramatic atmospheres.

The absence of men in her work to date suggests that her practice is specifically concerned with the relationships between women and the domestic environment, and it is clearly not complicit with the vision of home life espoused by many glossy magazines. Indeed, the women depicted, whose faces are often turned away or obscured, appear to lead unfulfilled lives – solitary, forlorn, disillusioned and seemingly resigned to their fate. But all is not quite as it seems, especially when it is known that these women are not in their own homes or wearing their own clothes, calling into question whom it is we are looking at, and indeed, who is looking. Walker's most recent works, exhibited in 2010 at Ivan Gallery, Bucharest, and in 2011 at Ana Cristea Gallery, New York, have a more mysterious, odd dynamic. Enhanced by a sharper palette of pinks, violets and turquoise, abetted by curious angles, perspectives and a more self-conscious attention to interior architecture and furniture, the relationships between the figures and their domestic environments are increasingly complex, dislocated and disconcerting.

Graham Chorlton's practice explores architecture and urban and suburban landscapes, almost always without people present, and often by night. Regularly focusing on modernist architecture and buildings constructed from concrete, Chorlton charges these places with melancholy, intrigue, and suspense. In *Blinds* (2007) the dark façade of a block of apartments is illuminated by streetlamps, brightly rendered blinds protruding at abrupt angles from two of the windows. Something doesn't seem quite right, leading us to wonder why this particular flat stands out. In one work, a sports car is viewed from above, driving along a country road. It is unclear whether it is by moonlight or sunshine after a storm, lending a sense of unease that is transferred to the driver of the car – who are they and where are they going to or coming from? In *EUR* (2007-9) a car is depicted arriving outside a house on a housing estate. The windows of both the car and the house are blacked out, blocking the viewer from any further clues as to the narrative. An avid reader of detective novels and murder mysteries, particularly Scandinavian noir and American noir, a sense of crime, mystery and of being a witness pervades his paintings.

The theme of not quite knowing what goes on behind closed doors in people's homes is continued in the work of Anna M R Freeman. Her paintings hover between the figurative and the abstract, presenting interior architecture as if fragments forced together – a brown staircase butted up against a cobalt blue wall, a ceiling punctured by a chandelier. The spaces depicted are often coherent, but demand some work on the part of the viewer to piece together – reflections in mirrors add complexity to the task. Freeman's thin glazes of oil turn bricks and mortar into viscous surfaces and crystalline shards.

For *Some Domestic Incidents*, Freeman shows new works from an ongoing series depicting the interior of a junk shop, filled with all manner of discarded objects from people's lives. Things from attics, the bottom of wardrobes or the back of a cupboard find their way to the secondhand marketplace – objects that were once part of the fabric of daily life – a gift from a friend, a family heirloom, a trinket from an admirer, or just bric-a-brac that has served its purpose. These things are detritus from people's homes that may find a new life, at least for a while, in the home of someone else and inevitably come with a story attached of the lives around them.

The incidents depicted in the paintings of Sally Payen are often violent or aggressive, representing social unrest in streets and public places. Her regularly grisaille depictions of protesters, rioters and hooligans gathering momentum or engaged in battle with riot police, mounted police or the army, mix together isolated scenes from events around the world throughout modern history, including The Troubles in Northern Ireland, tax riots in the UK or uprisings against military dictatorships in unspecified countries. Figurative motifs appear in episodic passages of paint, held together by virtually abstract clouds of pigment, hinting at urban spaces and the architecture that defines them.

In *Some Domestic Incidents*, Payen's works bring the unrest closer to home, presenting two new paintings in which an average suburban house becomes the scene of a disturbance. As night falls, a party has become out of hand and the police have been called out. Perhaps a domestic fight, the arrival of an unwelcome guest, or a drink or drug-related feud, Payen captures the confusion, awkwardness and ugliness of a pleasant evening that has turned sour. While it is a scene that is all too common in modern life, as with many of Payen's works, there are references to works from art history, most specifically here to Breugel's depiction of epileptic women being led to church where they were miraculously healed. Whether such divine intervention follows at the house party is more doubtful.

In the recent work of Oliver Clegg, the domestic environment literally becomes the artist's canvas. In one work, a woman in a white dress kneels in front of a wooden chest. The chest depicted has been dismantled by the artist and used as the support on which the image has been painted. Furniture is a recurring motif in Clegg's work – an old chair, a desk, a piano stool, all emerging as if memories imagined onto wooden boards. Indeed, the reflexivity of wooden items depicted on wooden boards somehow seems analogous with memory. As if Proustian psychological triggers, old children's toys, building blocks and games surface, inevitably evoking a variety of emotions about the places in which we ourselves grew up.

The contrast between harsh bright light and impenetrable shadow in Clegg's work charges the scenes with a heightened sense of drama and a decidedly sinister undertone. In one painting a girl kneels down holding the hand of another girl lying on the floor. Whether she has had an accident or been attacked remains unclear. Painted on a dismantled old desk now signifying the floorboards on which she spent her last moments, perhaps this desk once held the secrets of their identities and what went on here. In another work, the artist himself sits at a desk as if playing a part in his own narrative world.

The drama moves from the sentimental to a darker, stranger form in the work of Philip Hale. A vacuum cleaner sits in a cupboard, charged with the tension of a murder mystery; an elderly man stands in a garden by moonlight, seemingly poised to thrust a blade into his own stomach; a man with a naked torso twists as if in physical pain into the shadows offered by a wall. Indeed, Hale's work is often preoccupied by the human body, both its physical postures, which he treats with anatomical zeal, and its emotional states, to which he brings an existential pathos. It is perhaps this relationship between the physical and the psychological that underpins his practice.

In a body of work from 2010, *Record Relaxer*, a naked couple appears to be copulating on the bonnet of a car by night. Perhaps a couple enjoying being *en plein air*, or more likely, an illicit affair in an improvised camp, the atmosphere is more thriller than romance. A white van, its doors thrown open, serves as a backdrop against an otherwise pitch-black sky. Rendered with virtuosity and a palette reminiscent of much painting currently coming out of Eastern Europe, Hale's work is full of anomie, tension and an intimacy that emerges from the subconscious as much as from the physical and domestic world.

The work of Justin Mortimer also explores the human body in relation to states of mind, though with a particular emphasis on pain, suffering and abuse. In past works, Mortimer has depicted scenes of civil war, genocide and crimes against humanity such as the back of a lorry tipping corpses into a pit in the middle of a village, the roof of a cottage on fire after being hit by a mortar, or the body of a middle eastern girl hanging from a noose in a run-down suburban landscape. In the latter, a naked mother and child seem to be foraging around detritus next to the body as if in desperation for food and clothes. The boarded-up house behind them looks like it might have been burnt out during ethnic cleansing or by warring factions, though in fact is a derelict property in modern-day America, mixing up our expectations of cultural politics.

Following a solo show at Master Piper, London, in 2010, Mortimer's latest solo show at Mihai Nicodim in LA in spring 2011 presented astonishing and harrowing dark interiors, masterfully painted with an accomplished painterly realism, that appear to be sites of entrapment and torture. Figures, often with severe injuries, in pain or already dead, lie behind basement doors next to bin bags and electrical cables, on tables and against walls, in locations that seem somewhere between a house, a prison and a makeshift medical camp.

Brutality and the domestic environment are also present in the work of Keith Coventry. A versatile artist with a strong conceptual approach to painting that sees him traverse styles and genres with ingenuity, wit and ease, Coventry's body of 40 works, *Echoes of Albany* (2009) depicts episodes, scenes and vignettes from what has been described as Mayfair's most exclusive mansion block. Riddled with tradition, idiosyncrasy and implicit lascivious behavior, from call girls to cocaine, these curious works in a style reminiscent of Sickert offer an insight into the history – part imagined, part researched and in part inspired by first-hand experience of living there – of this private domestic world of London's elite.

In his iconic *Estate Paintings*, an ongoing body of work started in the 1990s, Coventry makes Russian Suprematist-style works based on the aerial maps that one often finds outside housing estates – utilitarian designs for navigation around residential sites transformed into geometric abstraction. Recent works in the series have an X to mark the spot where people have been murdered, turning these mass housing projects into crime sites in which homes can be reduced to lines and lives to crosses. It is a vision of domesticity that brings 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism into the often unpleasant reality of human nature.

## **Matt Price**