Graham Fletcher's 'Lounge Room Tribalism' and the domestic uncanny

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FRAMED BY AN OPEN DOOR AT THE TOP OF A STAIRCASE, André Breton, with fist pressed against cheek, gazes out from his writing table in the study at 42 Rue Fontaine. Behind him is that famous wall, now memorialised in its re-creation at the Centre Pompidou, densely packed with an array of objects and artworks that defies an obvious classificatory logic. A painting by Picabia, tribal artefacts, totems and statuettes from Oceania and the Americas rub shoulders with found objects, curiosities, and a framed photograph of Elisa Claro, Breton's third wife, in an altar-like assemblage that sprawls along irregular shelving. Taken from a distance, Sabine Weiss's c. 1955 photograph is less a portrait of an iconic intellectual than an image of a thinker, collector and dreamer encased in a personal museum which reveals a mysterious intermingling of identity, creativity and objects among the domestic interior.

Despite the collection's eclectic appearance, when Graham Fletcher encountered the arresting sight of the Breton wall at the Pompidou he recalls being struck by an appreciation of the 'harmonious dialogue between such disparate objects'.[1] A New Zealand artist with mixed Samoan and European heritage, Fletcher has, since the late 1990s, responded to ethnographic research in his practice and developed a fascination with the complex relations between myth, mimicry and authenticity and how they interact within what he terms the 'cross-cultural imaginary'. Identifying in Breton's collection the surrealist devotion to the idea that a magical transference arises from a startling or enigmatic object's capacity to emit surreal energies to the viewer, Fletcher also noted correlations with the South Pacific concept of *mana*.[2] In the wall at the Pompidou, Fletcher observed what was in fact the careful arrangement of 'communicating vessels', as Breton had deliberated over the ideal placement of found objects, artefacts and artworks to generate the maximum charge of *frisson* capable of setting the imagination in motion.

For Fletcher, the encounter with Breton's wall is one among a number of antecedent threads that informs his 'Lounge Room Tribalism' (2009–11) series in which tribal artefacts collaged into 1950s and 1960s modernist interiors assume an ominous, unsettling and at times vaguely menacing presence that simultaneously conjures the generative energies of the collecting impulse and mourns the separation of artefacts from their native cultural context and meaning. Five paintings are presented in the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT7) at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, drawn from a larger body of work which includes sculptures that recast idol objects into organic hybrid forms. Fletcher's paintings inflect APT7's central theme of our relationship to place with compelling cultural and temporal dislocations. A time-capsule effect emerges from the artist's re-creation of vintage interior furnishings and decor sourced from 1950s and 1960s architectural journals, periodicals and design books. Seeking to disrupt rather than reproduce, however, Fletcher gives the 'lived-in' interior new meaning when an anthropomorphic item, such as a Maori mask, peers out into a living space with a shocked expression that inverts the typical observer and observed economy. In another setting, a striking Papua New Guinea Baining mask is sited on a wall near a luminous white lamp and appears bathed in a haunting spectral glow, disturbing the comfort and control we might typically associate with the domestic space.

This tension sparked by the encroachment of the unfamiliar into the home points to the inherent instability of the domestic which, as it is understood today in the West, is intertwined with the emergence of a modern subjectivity defined as the private, autonomous, inward-looking individual. The domestic flourished in the nineteenth century when, in a departure from previous eras such as the seventeenth century during which time life was conceived largely in public terms, the home began to represent stability, security, freedom from intrusion, a space for contemplation and inner refinement as well as the embodiment of family life, social order and the laying down of roots. Across Europe, and most prevalently in cities, domesticity became inseparable from

the rise of the bourgeois interior, which today still evokes cocoon-like images of cluttered interiors filled to the brim with collections of photographs and bric-a-brac, hemmed in by heavy draperies and peopled with restrained, often solitary, dwellers, captured in moments of repose. Design historian Charles Rice linked the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior with attempts at self-definition, urging acknowledgment of its historical formation and an abandonment of the dangerous tendency to conflate the domestic with eternal, universal or unchangeable ideals of dwelling. Considering the bourgeois home in nineteenth-century France, social historians Michelle Perrot and Roger-Henri Guerrand astutely gauged its oppositional currents:

> Fortress of privacy, the home was protected by walls, servants and darkness. But it was also a place seething with internal conflict, a microcosm through which ran the tortuous boundary between public and private, male and female, master and servant, parent and child, family and individual.[3]

For those with a nostalgic temperament, the destabilising influence of the outbreak of war cast a seductive aura over the perceived gentle homeliness of the belle époque bourgeois interior. But the seething internal conflicts only became more pronounced as the twentieth century unfolded, increasingly finding expression in art in a visual language of alienation, confinement and spatial isolation and, in psychology, becoming the vital focus of Freudian psycho-analysis, in particular the notion of the domestic uncanny which continues to permeate representations of the home in contemporary art. As Anthony Vidler suggested, the uncanny finds its metaphorical home in architecture, yet its sensation is in fact provoked by slippages in representation. Rice noted how 'a confusion between a two-dimensional reflection and the three-dimensionality of space provided the spur to Freud's theorisation of the uncanny and, at the same time, his articulation of the psyche in terms of the double'.[4]

Such slippages both intrigue and disarm the viewer of Fletcher's 'Lounge Room Tribalism' paintings. In *Untitled (lounge room tribalism)*, 2011, a pair of matching yellow armchairs faces towards the warm hearth of a crackling fireplace where a traditional Poli currency textile from Papua New Guinea hangs overhead. The homely scene of a lit fire (a recurring motif in Fletcher's paintings) is rendered eerie by the absence of a human presence; or is someone there? A tribal statue guards the entrance to the home like a sentry, but is the warrior-like figure a protector or a threat? Most disconcerting, though, is the painting's point of view, which implies an intruder or outsider watching the house from beyond the picture plane. It is this redoubling of object and gaze that transforms the imaging of the domestic interior into such a highly charged psychic landscape. For Fletcher, 'the medium of painting offered me the freedom and immediacy to create imaginative combinations within a borderland world'.[5]

By situating his animated ethnographic artefacts within the modernist interior, Fletcher also revisits a period in which the avant-garde exhibited an especially uneasy relationship with the home, a time when, according to Christoper Reed, 'the domestic realm, seen as simultaneously popular and old-fashioned, became a perfect foil for architects aspiring to avant-garde status'.[6] Within the sphere of modern art, Reed pinpointed anti-domestic currents in such movements as 1950s abstract expressionism's aversion to kitsch, popular culture and the decorative, and the predilection for vast canvases that rejected painting on an intimate scale. Yet images of domestic life soon returned to visibility as pop artists began to pluck liberally from mass media and consumer culture, although there was no nostalgic return to home as sanctuary or private refuge. In Richard Hamilton's 1956 collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* the erotic re-situating of a muscled body builder and a nude burlesque dancer within a *Ladies' Home Journal* advertisement living-room interior reveals the penetration of advertising and mass media into every facet of home life. Later, Martha Rosler disrupts middle-

class American domesticity by placing it in direct proximity to the realities of war through the splicing together of war photographs from *Life* magazine with sleek interiors of *House Beautiful* in her series 'Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful' (1967–72).

In both Rosler's and Hamilton's domestic collages, the home is a permeable space where communications technologies unravel the boundaries between public and private, the self and the world at large that the house was once thought to maintain. Fletcher's interiors are similarly open-ended and susceptible to 'alien' influences from outside; however, the latent energy of the tribal objects also creates fields of possibilities where the grouping together of seemingly incongruous elements suggests both a creative and elegiac act as well as a generative inter-cultural sensibility. In 2003, Jacques Derrida protested the auction of Breton's vast personal collection from his home, describing the apartment as 'a space made up of creation and desire ... when you went into the flat, you discovered both the secret of a life and a movement of thought'.[7] There may be nothing universal or eternal about the ways in which we inhabit our homes yet Fletcher's 'Lounge Room Tribalism', like Breton's study, reveals how the domestic space, as an imaginative realm where we dream, invent, remember and negotiate increasingly complex identities, remains undeniably potent.

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1   Rhana Devenport, Graham Fletcher, James Pinker and Caroline Vercoe, *Lounge Room Tribalism*, exhibition catalogue, Mangere Arts Centre Ngā Tohu o Uenuku, Auckland, 2012, p. 10.

2   While employing a catch-all explanation of *mana* is problematic, the *New Penguin English Dictionary* offers a basic definition of the concept as: 'in Polynesia and Melanesia, the power of elemental forces embodied in an object or person'; Penguin, London, 2001, p. 844. For an account of the varied European usages and interpretations of mana, a useful starting point is Jonathan Z. Smith's *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004.

3   Michelle Perrot and Roger-Henri Guerrand, 'Scenes and places', in Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (eds), *A History of Private Life IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, Belknap of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 346.

4   Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 51.

5   Devenport et al., op. cit., p. 17.

6   Christopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 1996, pp. 10–11.

7   Jacques Derrida quoted in Dagmar Motycka Weston, 'Communicating vessels: André Breton and his atelier, home and personal museum in Paris', *Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2006, p. 106.

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Untitled (lounge room tribalism), 2010
Oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm
Collection Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
Courtesy the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland

opposite
Untitled (lounge room tribalism), 2011
Oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm
The University of Auckland Art Collection
Courtesy the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery, Auckland