



Ruth Cleland, *Level 2*, 2007-08, acrylic on canvas

Utopia or nightmare?

For some people suburban shopping malls and newly minted suburbs are objects of desire, but Ruth Cleland's paintings present them in a more ambiguous light. Virginia Were reports.

Ruth Cleland's work *Level 2*, which won her the Park Lane Wallace Trust Development Award in this year's Wallace Arts Awards, is a painting of one of the most mundane subjects one could imagine – a suburban shopping mall, which could be anywhere in the world but is in fact St Luke's in Auckland.

When I first saw this painting displayed among the helter skelter installation of finalists' works in the Aotea Centre in September, I noticed the dismissive shrug and quizzically raised eyebrows of the person next to me. Perhaps for them, the subject matter and Cleland's coolly objective delivery didn't register. However, what makes this painting so fascinating is the way the subject matter seems utterly banal and arbitrary – it's the sort of place we pass through all the time and barely even register – combined with the fact that Cleland had invested the painting with meticulous, painstaking and mesmerising detail, working on it for over a year and juggling a part time job at the Mt Roskill Library with her art practice. It's the sole work completed by the artist in that year and

an example of what Wallace Award judge Dick Frizzell referred to as the vital importance of craft in the works he and the other two judges chose as winners in this year's award.

Like many good artworks it's a celebration of the commonplace, stopping you in your tracks, demanding you spend time with it and slowing you down so you are compelled to look intently... and then look some more, letting your eyes wander through the closed glass doors in the foreground, across the pedestrian crossing and into the deep, recessive space of the car park beyond. Strip lighting and concrete pillars lead your eye to the bright daylight and greenery on the other side of the building. At first the illusion is complete: you could be looking at a photograph, so lovingly is each detail rendered – the mottled grid of white tiles and 'wheelchair access' signs in the foreground, the eerie glow of the tail lights of a car edging into a space inside the gloomy interior, but the more you look, the more you notice the jarring notes of abstraction. On the glass doors, normally covered with

corporate logos, are pixellated shapes, which reinforce the artifice of the image, the fact that though it has been painted from a photograph rather than from life, it's ultimately imperfect and handmade.

Though it could be described as photorealism, *Level 2* has elements of the surreal – because the one thing we associate with shopping malls are throngs of people, and there are none in this painting, or in any of the series of paintings and drawings of suburban housing developments Cleland began in 2004. The first work in the series, *A Sunny Day in Mosgiel*, won a merit award at the National Drawing Award at Artspace in that year. “From there I moved on to Hamilton scenes, although I did do one drawing which combined the two locations, titled *Sunny Days in Hamilton and Mosgiel*.”

Though her images appear random, as if any photograph would do as the source of a painting, she explains the opposite is true. The paintings begin as she looks through the lens of her camera.

“I take lots of photos and from these I select what I’m going to paint or draw. I’m pretty faithful to the photograph and don’t tend to crop the image

in any way. I use the photo as a compositional tool and refer to the process by painting exactly what is in the photo, right down to the distortion of the lens because the images are often slightly bowed. In *Level 2*, for example, the sliding doors have a slight bow, so I’m referring to the photograph as much as to the original subject.”

Despite first impressions there’s nothing arbitrary in her crisply formal compositions – foregrounds underpinned by the gridded arrangement of floor tiles in *Escalator* and *Level 2*, and by the abstract patterns of painted car parking spaces in *Sunny St Lukes*. In all these works there’s an unsettling tension between the abstract and the representational, between perfection and imperfection. The centrally placed escalator, which is also in St Lukes, has a monumental, sculptural feel and like *Level 2* all identifying logos and signage have been edited out and replaced with pixellated shapes. The lines of an underlying grid are clearly visible in *Escalator* and like the blurred edges of paint that Cleland has left visible on the sides of her canvases, they’re evidence of the artist’s hand and the ultimate failure of the illusion.



Ruth Cleland, *Escalator*, 2007, graphite pencil drawing on board



Ruth Cleland, *A Sunny Day in Hamilton*, 2005, acrylic on canvas

The anonymity of these spaces emphasizes their universality; the fact they could be anywhere.

Cleland's cool, detached approach to her subject matter is interesting given the current debates about the negative social and environmental impacts of new suburbs and tract housing. The so-called 'cookie cutter houses', which seem to spring up overnight in featureless cul-de-sacs, arouse horror and condemnation in some and yet many people aspire to live in them.

"I have a love-hate relationship with suburbia," Cleland says. "I go to shopping malls because they're convenient. Even though some people may not like malls, we all use them, so I don't want these works to be overtly negative or judgmental. But I don't want them to look like an ad in the newspaper either."

"My parents moved to Rototuna, one of the newer suburbs in Hamilton in 2002, and visiting them made me start thinking about these areas. The suburbs in Hamilton were going up so quickly; every time I visited from Dunedin, there was a new suburb. I made a series of paintings and drawings of suburbia in 2005 and these were exhibited at the Blue Oyster Gallery in Dunedin. Then when we moved to Auckland in 2006 I began focusing on shopping malls. The malls seemed to be an

obvious progression because they are the shopping centre of the suburbs and have the same kind of uniformity as the suburban houses."

"Some artists reference suburbia in a nostalgic way, looking back to a time when they were growing up. But I'm really interested in now – what has recently been built and what people maybe wouldn't think of recording. I do see my works as a form of documentation."

Working with acrylic paint because it doesn't require toxic solvents, she's clearly a magician when it comes to rigorous representations of architecture – both interior and exterior. Perspective and architectural details taken from old houses in Dunedin where she lived while at art school formed the basis of her earlier work as a printmaker specialising in burnished aquatints. But these works had a more romantic, nostalgic sense than the suburban series.

Completing a BFA and then an MFA at Otago School of Art in Dunedin in 2002, Cleland won first prize in the Cranleigh Barton National Drawing Award in 2001 and first prize in the Waikato National Art Award in 2003. She's originally from Gordonton near Hamilton and now lives in Mt Eden with her husband and fellow MFA graduate Gary McMillan, who won a jury prize in

this year's Wallace Awards for his painting, *Motorway*. The couple, both from the Waikato, met at art school in Dunedin and both work in a photo-realist style.

Two easels are set up side by side in the sunny front room of their home, and people often comment on the similarity of their work. Cleland says though they are developing parallel careers and often discuss their work, their concerns are different. On one of the easels is McMillan's exquisitely detailed monochromatic painting of Spaghetti Junction. In the foreground he has painted himself looking startled like a fictional character in a film, and there are no cars on the motorway so the work has an empty, apocalyptic feel. On the other easel is Cleland's painting of the rooftop parking deck at St Lukes. Her work is more formal and restrained, less subjective but just as meticulously crafted as her partner's work.

Cleland hopes McMillan will be able to go with her to the Vermont artists' residency, which comes with her Wallace Award. This will be her first trip to the northern hemisphere, giving her the chance to work full time for three months, though she laughingly remarks that Vermont is one of America's least populated states and perhaps not peppered with shopping malls.

Asked about other artists she admires, Cleland mentions Latvian-born American artist Vija Celmins, famous for her astoundingly beautiful representations of nature – seascapes, night skies and barren desert floors, which she works on for many months, rendering them with an uncanny accuracy. Like Cleland, Celmins works from photographs, and though her subject matter revolves around nature and the sublime, the dense materiality and intensely realistic nature of her images is similar.

Celmins is also a skilled printmaker who produces oil paintings and charcoal drawings as well as prints. In an interview posted on the net, she talks about "building" a painting rather than "painting" a painting and describes her enjoyment of being back in the studio after a year's break and "working on this strange tedious surface".

Though Cleland doesn't use the word "tedious" in connection with her work, she does talk about the frustrations of working so slowly. She also notes, "I think my process definitely reflects the subject matter. In a mall, though you wouldn't know it, nothing is left to chance."

By investing so much time in an apparently unremarkable subject and by bringing to it the dedication of that ancient craft – painting – Cleland is paying homage to that peculiar icon of our times, which is much loved by some and reviled by others – the new housing estate and the suburban shopping mall.

"I actually find these works quite funny," she comments. "It really comes down to who is looking at them."



Ruth Cleland



Ruth Cleland, *Sunny St Lukes*, 2007, graphite pencil drawing on paper. Private collection



Ruth Cleland, *Another Sunny Day in Hamilton*, 2005, acrylic on canvas