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# ruth cleland

Born Hamilton 1976

MFA OSA 2002

Lives in Auckland

Ruth Cleland is an artist in the photorealist tradition. Her pencil drawings of suburban houses are only distinguishable from black-and-white photo-prints after close and careful examination (cf. McMillan, 64). Why go to so much trouble? Photorealism is all about taking the time to look, but at banal things usually ignored. In Cleland's case, these are aspects of the spaces that she has lived in and around.

Cleland trained as a printmaker in aquatint, a demanding medium calling for meticulous preparation and attention to detail. Rather against tradition, she found that her prints, already tonally complex, could be improved by adding detail in pencil. In 2001 she went further by marrying prints and drawings on the one sheet of paper. Her subjects at this time were familiar, but often overlooked, areas, such as the corners of rooms and stairwells. Space emerged from soft gradations of tone constrained by angular elements — the intersection of walls, cornices and joints between panels. The artist describes these as 'areas in which the imagination awaits'. Because her drawing is absolutely and consistently accurate, Cleland's works of this period are disorientating. One can be deluded into thinking one is looking down, when, in fact, one is looking up. Objects in the frame are presented in odd perspectives; objects out of the frame cast vague shadows, and hanging lights appear to shoot out from walls like alien probes.

In 2004 Cleland turned her attention to the suburbs around Hamilton, where her parents live. The space of interest here was exterior space, defined by the geometry of kerbs, rooflines, driveways and garage doors. Cleland's meticulous renditions in paint



Top: *A Sunny Day in Mosgiel*, 2004. Graphite pencil on paper, 210 x 296 mm.

Bottom: *Sunny Days in Hamilton*, 2006. Acrylic on canvas, 450 x 600 mm.





and pencil are spacious, yet suffocating. There are cars parked off the road, but no people. They must all be inside, perhaps watching the rugby on TV. These generic locations of no scenic interest could be in any newish New Zealand suburb. Cleland's purpose, through her expenditure of prodigious time and effort, is to make us ponder what makes a 'scenic' view, and whether (or why) contemplating a landscape painting of the more traditional variety is a worthwhile activity.

Cleland's most recent works, featuring mall entrances, escalators and carparks, echo the American photorealists of

the 1970s. Some pieces present strong geometric features, such as sliding doors, making an internal frame through which a complex interior is glimpsed. This is a managed reality. Scrutiny reveals that the artist has pixellated many of the signs, turning them into neutral compositional elements. Like her suburban works, some of these commercial studies feature large areas of empty space in the foreground, forcing the eye to roam around looking for relevant content. Often there isn't any. At this point Cleland's works approach abstraction.

Above: *Car Park*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 560 x 835 mm.

Right: *Stratus*, 2002. Burnished aquatint print and graphite pencil on paper, 420 x 300 mm.

