

ELVIS RICHARDSON



ITS FLATTERY LIES

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Absence, ambition and abandonment, cornerstones of Elvis Richardson's practice for decades, are manifest in *Settlement* (2016) and *Artist Lifestyle* (2018). Savouring the intimacies of ordinary lives, she collects and curates imagery from public repositories and constructs objects using commonplace industrial design processes. In these works Richardson's emotionally and politically charged narratives scrutinise the inequities of home ownership and the Australian property market.

Both artworks are constructed within tight parameters. The flat, low resolution, mostly amateur interior photographs of houses in the first iteration of *Settlement* (2015–16), were sourced via 'For Sale' search criteria of '2 bedroom house', 'less than \$250,000', 'anywhere in Australia' on Domain.com.au. A similar methodology of search engine generation assembled ten anagrams of the evocative phrase 'artist lifestyle', each hand-painted in enamel on aluminium, simulating council-approved, suburban real estate advertising signage.

Littered with ornament and wood veneer, *Settlement's* low-end images, reposted without comment to Facebook and Instagram, interject reflective moments amongst the chatter of status updates and vacation selfies. These seemingly unremarkable images elicit a range of personal and philosophical responses from childhood nostalgia, thinly disguised moral judgement, empathy for the emblems of tragedy and tenancy enquiries to critiques of disruption and movement in late neoliberal capitalism.

Having previously lived/worked in Sydney, London and New York, Richardson is well acquainted with the impacts of bloated property markets on artists' lives, and the scarcity of permanency and security for everyone on low incomes who rents. Richardson speaks for and to a growing underclass of artists and writers, the underpaid, the not paid, the badly resourced, the regional, the young and the ageing – those who will never be able to achieve the 'Australian Dream' of home ownership or materialise the promises of a university education.

Previous and left, top and bottom: *Artist Lifestyle*, 2018. Enamel on aluminium. Installation views, various locations, Mair Street; Bodkin Street; Beauchamp Street; Ebdon Street, Kyneton. Images courtesy of the artist. Photographs: Ian Hill



On display are remnants of displaced lives – the itinerant, the groundless, the hastily departed, the abandoned, the them of questionable identity. A laziness of socks, the pathology of too many clocks, blinds drawn in secrecy, cubist heaters and aircon ducts. Oddly placed power points – cream clouds – float on powder-blue asbestos walls, while a ray of sunlight quivers across a pink-quilted flammable bedspread. Forlorn possessions packed, stacked, ready to go. The sweaty indent of a sleeper's head on a stained pillow. Exquisite? Sublime? Mundane?

Formalism thinly masks socioeconomic reality in undressed, unbeautiful, superseded houses. A red chair gazes towards frosted windows in a sunroom without a view. Psychosis-inducing texture and pattern shock us as sophisticated consumers of the style industry. Slipping through renovators' gaps, unadorned by granite bench tops and Italian mosaic tiles, un-serviced by stainless steel appliances or marble bathrooms. Unfashionable failures, they can't even aspire to be mismatched Boho. Losers whose only redemption is the investment market.

Employing the hallmarks of real estate video walk throughs, Richardson reconstructs these images into the video iteration of *Settlement* (2016), underscored by James Hayes' simultaneously soothing and disquieting soundscapes. Installed in Kyneton photographer Margaret Chandra's spare room, perhaps the most poignant vignette is of a deceased estate. Focus pulls back from a heavy-framed photograph of a femme fatale, candle-lit upon a substantial fireplace. Her empty hospital bed haunts a distant room; a lifetime of repackaged things waiting silently to be discarded or distributed to family, friends and charity shops.

But like all ends it is just the beginning.

Signifying bohemian nostalgia, hipster funk, intellectual prestige and bespoke style *Artist Lifestyle*, sited on picket fences and in leafy front yards, teases us to unpack tags such as STIR STATELY LIFE, FITS RETAIL STYLE OR TASTE FIRST I YELL – imperious wordsmithing and eye-catching graphics to attract the greatest number of potential purchasers. Just like the signage that inspired them, these hard-edged, uber-slick hoardings are designed for optimum brightness, ensuring that they work day and night to maximise the exposure of their Kyneton properties.

Artist Lifestyle lays bare an ouroboros, the ensnarement of artists in their own diminished economic security. As the serpent eats its tail in order to sustain its own life, artists move to low-rent districts, reinvigorating the urban decay of impoverished neighbourhoods or dwindling rural townships. They attract other artisans and build flourishing communities. Drawn by creative

studios in refurbished factories, charming cafes and quirky restaurants, edgy art, sound, poetry and performance events, the more economically privileged, perhaps even wealthy, move in, pushing up property values. Artists and writers are priced out of their own communities.

LEFTIST SALTY IRE perhaps – Richardson's deceptively simple disruptions of gentrification and real estate marketing have been inspired in part by 19th century American political economist and philosopher Henry George. Almost anticipating the destruction wrought by today's investor-driven sharing economies like Airbnb, George proposed in *Progress and Poverty* (1879) that land, resources and rents are shared for common good in lieu of taxes, halting the displacement of poorer residents through the creep of renewal. It is economically possible to abolish intellectual property, make public transport free and provide a universal pension.

But the ugly surety of our property market is that there is no common winning point. Some must always settle for less. Thinking back to Richardson's *Home* (1996) – 100 square metres of stained and scuffed trophy-grey carpet removed from the rooms of an inner-city youth refuge and hung in the giant display windows of the former Mark Foy's Emporium, now Sydney District Criminal Court – the personal, social and economic narratives of our time remain dishearteningly similar.

Artist Lifestyle's shiny aspiration of home ownership, of standing out from the crowd, and *Settlement's* unfiltered glance at disappointingly sad interiors, live on the same block. They document the dilemma of the artist, the place of home in our national psyche and the impact on lives in transition. No amount of image management can disguise Richardson's bold and damning view through the revolving doors of urban renewal. ITS FLATTERY LIES.

Next: *Artist Lifestyle*, 2018. Enamel on aluminium. Installation view, Piper Street, Kyneton. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Ian Hill



ARTIST
LIFESTYLE

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Artist Lifestyle



Top: *Settlement*, 2016. Video 9.06 minutes with sound by James Hayes. Installation view, Piper Street, Kyneton. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Ian Hill

Above, left: *Settlement*, 2016. Still images from video. Images courtesy of the artist

Right: *Artist Lifestyle*, 2018. Enamel on aluminium. Installation view, Mitchell Street, Kyneton. Image courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Ian Hill

