

The homes of others: Margaux Williamson's brilliantly disordered 'Interiors' at McMichael are a rare glimpse into people's inner lives

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Novelists, Virginia Woolf once said, almost never comment on the content of lunches, writing “as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever, as if nobody ever smoked a cigar or drank a glass of wine.” The “soup and salmon and ducklings” are of eminent importance to the painter Margaux Williamson — though they show up in her recent paintings as lettuce, tortillas and half-eaten coffee cake.

There may not be cigars but there are cigarettes and cellphones, empty beer bottles and bottles of wine. Her exhibition at the McMichael Gallery is called “Margaux Williamson: Interiors,” and in the barely contained spaces on

display there's no shortage of the ordinary details so beloved of Woolf. They accumulate and multiply. They come into their own.

How they do so is through a trick of perspective. Everything seems to have come unstuck. Tables, beds, countertops and a bathtub tilt upwards as if they're about to fall into the gallery, sending laptops, magazines and file folders tumbling like the blankets and bottles already scattered on painted floors. In the exhibition's catalogue, Jessica Bradley, its curator, describes space "cast into vertiginous, even reckless, relations where several planes and time frames exist with a single image." The American poet and novelist Ben Lerner calls the paintings hinged, the horizontals and verticals connecting at angles that are sometimes less and sometimes more than a realistic ninety degrees. It's not what we're used to.



What we are used to are curated rooms. The perfectly ordered interiors of design magazines, social media, coffee table books that sit unopened on perfectly curated coffee tables. In those rooms, if pillows are scattered they're artfully scattered, not hovering beside a crumpled bedspread and an uncleared

bowl and open can, as they are in “Pillows” (2021). A place for everything and everything in its place — those are the interiors we’re used to seeing. The bananas are yellow, not spotted with brown. The lettuce is out of its plastic packaging. The piece of cake on a plate is a pretty piece of cake, freshly sliced. If there’s a party it’s the start of the party, when everyone looks fresh and the (full) bottles are in a bucket of ice, promising fun we’ll never see.

Williamson’s paintings, by contrast, never settle. That’s where the mug was when she worked on it, but now in relation to the table it’s more like it’s over here. The chair is how it was on Tuesday, pulled out from Sunday’s table. She’s fascinated by time, how “the more you look (at it), the more you can’t see it at all.” Looking at time starts to undo it, so the night around a fire pit in “Fire” (2021) settles into a stack of all its different stages — ashes, embers, catching logs, conflagration — like a long exposure photo where the people disappear because they’re moving too fast. Orchids fragment and multiply so that, in “Desk” (2020) a single plant becomes a collection.



The order shifts from something dead to something alive. “I still find it kind of strange that there is so much order in the world,” Williamson says in an interview with her friend and frequent interlocutor, the writer Sheila Heti, in an interview included in the catalogue, “and not the cruel kind.”

Conversations between the two bleed into the art each creates. Williamson is also the Margeaux in Heti’s celebrated book “How Should A Person Be?” which reproduces some of their email exchanges. As artists, they are fundamentally acquisitive.

Williamson takes Woolf’s soup and salmon and runs with them. For Woolf the details of lunch, whether in fiction or in life, were important because they told you something about the people lunching. It was important that when she had lunch with the fellows of an Oxbridge men’s college they had ducklings. At the women’s college they had boiled beef and, shudder, prunes. These

external realities, Woolf argues, shape our perceptions of the people they surround. If we're comparing Williamson's paintings to a design magazine ideal, who wouldn't want the bed piled high with colour-coordinated pillows or long for a gleaming kitchen counter anchored by a bowl of mouth-watering fruit? But Williamson's object-filled interiors are fundamentally unconcerned with the kind of external life that Woolf's objects reveal.



Williamson's rooms remind me of how the British writer Rachel Cusk has described the tension between seeming and being in domestic spaces.

Seeming is the fruit bowl; being is a painting by Margaux Williamson. Describing a friend's house in London, Cusk writes, "The foreground is entirely human here: The rooms may have been neglected but the people haven't been."

The foreground is human in Williamson's paintings, too, whether the background is a kitchen or a desk, a living room, a neighbourhood bar or the void of nothingness around a tangled head of hair. Even without human figures, human traces are everywhere — particularly her own, in the file folders that are stacked and ready for working in "Window" (2017) and "Table and Chair" (2016) and scattered under glass in two large table vitrines that sit in the centre of one of the exhibition's rooms. She gives us a world richly inhabited.



We've seen a lot of interiors in the past few years, in the backgrounds of meetings and television interviews that never used to be given at home. At first it was fun and maybe a bit transgressive trying to parse details of inner

lives from the titles on a bookshelf. But these glimpses into other people's interiors rarely get us closer to them. They give the illusion of intimacy but give nothing away. Maybe this is comforting. It's uncomfortable to put your messy, lived-in floor on display. It's easier to put up a background of a tropical island or loft office, or settle into that familiar grey blur.

Williamson's interiors are as alive as we all are inside. Her cakes get eaten, her chairs get moved, the bottles are where they landed after the party. "Interiors" is a place you can live in. You can stand between a painting of a pine tree and one of a storm and feel for a moment suspended, like the waves of both are holding you up, alive in the world and alive inside, moving through all your own interiors in a way that leaves a wake.