

Kate Gottgens : Malice Aforethought

16 May 2013 - 06 Jul 2013 SMAC Gallery – Cape Town

It begins with the discovery of a book. Covered in beige cloth and embossed with red letters, it is an elegant enough object, but seems fairly innocuous at first. Its contents will have a hold on her for the passage of a year, governing what she has chosen to do with her days – that is, to paint. It is a book of Bauhaus-inspired mid-century modern houses – utopian fantasies of middle-class suburban bliss. Atomised, Depopulated, sans the familial fallout. Geometries of pure possibility awaiting habitation, She starts to occupy these brut structures, feeling out the seductions and restrictions of their internal spaces, exploring empty rooms in which surrogate chairs and tables hint at scenes that might have unfolded here. In fact, it is difficult to discern a tense. Has the action already happened or is it about to occur?

At first she paints quite consciously with a sober fidelity to the architecture. The scale is compact. She is in control of her materials. But as the months pass, the emptiness of the rooms takes hold of her, unlocking old patterns laid down, like code, inside of her. Figures begin to enter the scenes. She works from an archive of found photographs, none of them her own. It is dizzying; the intimacies that can transpire between strangers. At times it feels necessary to establish some distance. She steps back from the canvas to orient herself, reasserting her omniscience, convincing herself of her innate capacity for criticality – her ability to step outside of the picture. But as the months go

by, her fictions dilate. She grows looser with her mark-making, layering over dead-end detours, allowing herself to make the necessary mistakes. The canvases grow larger and she upscales her brushes, painting wet into wet, as if in a trance.

Abstract shapes compete for prominence with half-remembered characters caught up in a succession of life-changing moments; goodbyes at airports, camping trips, an illicit encounter in a hotel room – the unpredictable shards of narrative that constitute an inner life. She is painting ecstatically now. Freely giving herself over to the force of it.

One day – it is after an exhibition date has been agreed upon with the gallery – she notices a familiar shape coming through in an otherwise abstract painting with a rough, almost sketchbook quality about it. An off-kilter ovoid loosely depicting a swimming pool, the shape triggers in her an instance of *déjà vu*. She steps back from the canvas to survey the paintings now all about her in the studio, seeking in their surfaces the same liquid sphere of fullness. At first, she cannot locate it. She sees only flatness and voids. But then she recognises it in the form of a table top in a small black-and-white interior. She finds it again in a UFO hovering in the dystopian ether. And in that shape repeating itself through her, she realises that these paintings are starting to make a strange kind of sense. Between them and among them a narrative of sorts is emerging.

by Alexandra Dodd