



HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH

# Three Houses Down

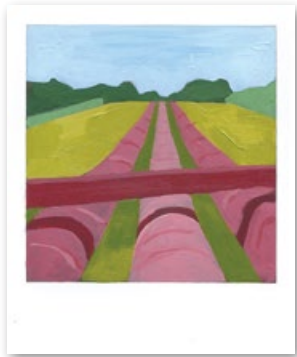
4 JULY - 1 AUGUST 2020

PEACOCK GALLERY AND AUBURN ARTS STUDIO

# Notes On Suburbia

A RESPONSE TO HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH'S *THE PIPELINE*

BY FELICITY CASTAGNA

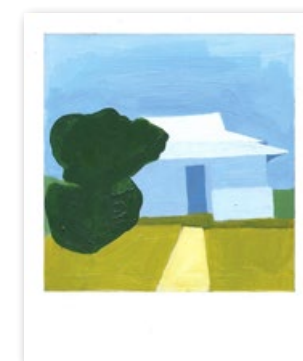


If the photograph, as Susan Sontag claims, is a note taking form, then these images are notes on suburbia. Suburbia not just as a place but as a way of thinking and living, a lens through which we can see the world and understand our place within it - suburbia as a possibility. They say *here*, on the outskirts of cities, people's lives are written in fibro and red brick and pressed cardboard walls. *Here*, on any street you can look to the past, present and future all in this one space, on this same stretch of road where kids play in the room behind the corner store and a yacht sits stranded in someone's yard. A lowered Honda skids and floats down the concrete. A goat somewhere. An Arabic love song escapes through a window. The pipelines stretch themselves over the land of the Bidjigal clan and hum.

*"I paint over the polaroids because I want them to be more than photographs of this place, but narratives that can recall different and broader experiences."*

- HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH

The photograph is meant to be witness to something real. In painting over polaroids, French takes away some of the accuracy that photography is famous for but she replaces it with the texture and essence of the suburban home: something very literal is elevated to metaphor. In these images, I can see that the painting is a kind of thinking-work. Something that speaks to the way that suburbia can be the space where the imaginary, memory and desire collide. These houses are of Guildford, but they also represent a kind of 'suburban everywhere.' All suburbs have their own topography. Their own folklore, their own way of feeling them when you walk through them. They have negotiable spaces, closed spaces, things that no one knows about them and we get that here: we are invited in on the joke, to smile at that local sign that reads 'You Will Feel Like You're On A Tropical Island' when you are so far from the sea, or to notice the way that the path at the local park curves like a snake. These images are both an intense and specific portrait of one time and place, but they also speak to broader ideas about what suburbia means specifically in the Australian imagination - everything from a homogenous anti-intellectual space to the place we find belonging and safety. There is a recognition here of the signifying power and the political potential of specific places - the home, the suburb.



It is always summertime, I think, in these images, or at least they make me think of summer - the way the light falls thick and buttery across a rectangular patch of lawn that has always just been mowed.



I'm tempted to start reciting Ania Walwicz' poetry here, "Acres of suburbs watching the telly. You bore me. Freckle silly children. You nothing much." Or maybe something from Arthur Boyd's *The Great Australian Ugliness*, that book where he claims those acres and acres of suburbs are a kind of visual pollution. But it's that sunlight that stops me - reminds me that that's not what French is doing here. It's the sunlight that says stop. Look. The light softens those hard rectangular forms. Suburbs are so often associated with ordinariness, with uniformity. I say 'suburb', you think of hard things; maps in endless grid shapes, the perfectly quarter-acre-block. Bricks. And bricks and bricks. Fibro. McMansions. More bricks. Maybe shopping trolleys. But perhaps that's because we are not looking at those suburban spaces very hard. What about the way the light hits the grass in the image above and frames the house? What about that dusty afternoon pink? These images alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at. Time itself slows down. Art can make you change the way that you imagine something you think you know. So can sunlight. Extraordinary.

What is  
beautiful here?



It's the limited colour palette that draws those individual houses—and the solitary narratives of the people who occupy them—together and places them all in the same story. No moment is more important than another; no house is more interesting than the next. It's a move that engages the viewer in an endless dialogue about Boyd's arguments that the suburban home represents the individualistic, inegalitarian and selfish lives of contemporary communities.



French's images invite the reader to observe, without distraction, the minute details of suburbia. She lets these images 'talk' for themselves as symbols and icons, to argue the centrality of home as the overarching theme in any kind of narrative we tell ourselves about suburbia. There is the palpable sense of silence that extends from the images themselves to the white polaroid frame that borders it. It is an invitation for the viewer to imaginatively fill in the details that are missing in these images - the events that might be happening in backyards, the sounds seeping out onto the footpath, the smell of dinner cooking.

Silence represents, as Sontag claims, everything that could be said or experienced but isn't: silence in art is often a way of inviting the audience in and asking them to engage with and critique a space by exploring the imaginative possibilities that that silence holds.



An image is a record. It is evidence. It is something that says that this thing is worthy of keeping beyond the physical existence of what is being captured. This white rectangle of a home has meaning, it is there, and it is significant. For me that also implies a kind of mourning, a nostalgia that speaks to what will inevitably be lost with the passing of time. These images are a memorialisation of suburban life.



How do you think through the collective past of a suburb? Those Guildford pipelines that still carry water across Sydney are a good start. The three pipelines laid side by side illustrate the advancements in major pipeline construction over a span of some 37 years. Pipeline No. 1(1888) was constructed from wrought iron, Pipeline No. 2 (1900) from mild steel and Pipeline No. 3(1925) from electrically welded steel plates. How do you go deeper, beyond that, how do you acknowledge the stories from before it was a suburb, when Indigenous women initiated diplomatic talks with white settlers over food supplies and Pemulwuy led guerrilla attacks against those invaders?



What are people doing in these houses? In these quiet and ordinary spaces. I picture this: old hands shelling peas, someone lost in that portrait on the mantelpiece of a loved one left behind in another country, a mother sticking the illegible drawings of their children to the refrigerator door.

But there are no people in French's work. There is no one to use that lonely telephone booth. No one to call. It's the house that stands in for the person; that building that sits on the cusp between ourselves and the world. "We build dwellings and thereafter they build us," said Winston Churchill. Our houses make us remember who we are. They are the stuff of dreams. They are what we spend our waking hours working for.



But a house is not the same as a home. Home is when memory is all tied up in physical spaces. Home is a story we tell ourselves about who we are and who and what we want closest in our minds. Home is the way that we are connected to a particular street, an outdoor shed, the yellowing patch of lawn in our backyard. I think sitting with an image of a home like French does is a recognition of the power a house can have over you, the way it can continue to reverberate inside you long after you have lived in it.

Who are these homes?



These homes are our collective history. They are sanctuaries and impending disasters. They are lust poured into concrete form.

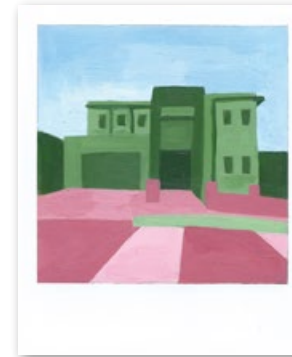


Fibro is often considered a manifestation of 1950s and 60s suburban idealism, their neat proportions aspiring to a similarly neat life within their walls. Wunderlich, the company who first produced fibro, described it as "a vertical grooved sheet...in tune with modern design...which brings real glamour to the most economical of building materials."

And of course, being made from asbestos it also brings death.



In architectural manuals the image to the left is called Post-War Immigrant Nostalgic Style. It's when you pull out the grass and lay down a lot of concrete and decorate your facades with a lot of columns and Mediterranean check patterns like the ones on the garage doors pictured. It says, basically I've made it here, but I also came from somewhere else.



If Fibro is aspiration, then those McMansions are something akin to lust. The McMansion is the people's mansion. It is the housing choice most often associated with the class of voter nicknamed aspirational. Upwardly mobile. Family centered.

A solid, permanent home.



The desire for a home in suburbia is often about wishing for safe spaces where we will be loved and not alone, where our lives will be sunlit. Sweet. A home in the suburbs is a machine to slow down the passing of time, a barrier against history, the hope for something better (even though many times, it can't be any of these things).





But here you are. You can possess it, symbolically at least. You can take a polaroid. Paint over it. Put it on the wall of your suburban home. It's hard to understand the world but you can collect it.

#### IMAGE CREDITS

#### THREE HOUSES DOWN

All artworks by  
HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH

MEDIUM:  
acrylic on polaroid photographs

DIMENSIONS:  
24 pieces, 11cm x 9cm each

YEAR: 2018-2020

#### PAGE 2

LEFT: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 1)*  
MIDDLE: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 20)*  
RIGHT: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 23)*

#### PAGE 3

TOP: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 15)*  
MIDDLE: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 22)*  
BOTTOM: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 11)*

#### PAGE 4

TOP: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 4)*  
BOTTOM: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 35)*

#### PAGE 5

LEFT: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 28)*  
MIDDLE: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 29)*  
RIGHT: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 34)*

#### PAGE 6

TOP: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 17)*  
BOTTOM: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 14)*

#### PAGE 7

TOP: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 12)*  
MIDDLE: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 18)*  
BOTTOM: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 8)*

#### PAGE 8

TOP: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 10)*  
BOTTOM: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 21)*

#### PAGE 9

TOP: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 27)*  
MIDDLE: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 26)*  
BOTTOM: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 13)*

#### PAGE 10

TOP LEFT: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 2)*  
TOP RIGHT: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 6)*  
BOTTOM: *The Pipeline Polaroids (Guildford 3)*


## Peacock Gallery and Auburn Arts Studio

Auburn Botanic Gardens,  
Corner of Chiswick and Chisholm Roads,  
Auburn

PHONE  
8757 9029

EMAIL  
peacockgallery@cumberland.nsw.gov.au

[www.cumberland.nsw.gov.au/arts](http://www.cumberland.nsw.gov.au/arts)

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### Three Houses Down Project Team

ARTIST  
Hayley Megan French

PEACOCK GALLERY STAFF  
Katinka Bracker / Michael Brown / Chenxu (Grace) Jiang /  
Laurissa Onato / Talia Smith / Kristina Tito

EXHIBITION INSTALLATION  
Timothy Dale

CATALOGUE DESIGN  
Michelle Tran

CATALOGUE PRINT  
Image Print

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COVER:

Hayley Megan French, *The Pipeline Polaroids (Three Houses Down 1)*, 2020  
acrylic on polaroid photograph, 11cm x 9cm