



MARIE SHANNON | *The house at night*, 1991

When as an eight-year-old Marie Shannon was required to make a model of her family home for a school project, she instead came up with a rendition of an ‘archetypal 1960s suburban house’.²¹⁸ *The house at night* is a reworking of this childhood construction — a model of a model, which Shannon has described as a ‘distillation’ of all her constructed works. She comments, ‘I think I must have been overambitious, as it was pretty much an unfinished failure, but I could see clearly what I was trying to do. When it came time to present our models, the teacher pointed mine out as an example of a very bad model of a house, and even flicked the roof with his finger so it fell off... I didn’t connect that episode with *The house at night* until years after making it.’²¹⁹

The creative possibilities of failure are never far from Shannon’s practice. The first of her model constructions, *Rat in the lounge*, 1985 (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa), restaged an actual event, and featured Shannon wearing a handmade cardboard rat mask as an embarrassingly miscued costume-party disguise. Her photographic texts of the mid-1990s

recount engagingly ludicrous ideas for video artworks that she never produced (they would have been ‘a lot of work to make,’ she confides in her *Art bloopers*, 1994). Like *The house at night*, many of Shannon’s images reveal heroic ideas rendered with purposefully inadequate means: a ‘museum’ of cat-fur samples, for example, or a map of New Zealand sculpted in potting mix on the carpet.

Shannon describes these small-scale domestic installations as ‘unworthy objects’,²²⁰ and her photographs celebrate the intimate and handmade. Her large-format camera and use of available light reveal the textural detail of her subjects — here the wobbly edges of the model house and smudges of glue are evident for the viewer’s inspection. Shannon discovered, somewhat to her surprise, that her better-made models make less interesting photographs: ‘There was nothing that came through in the photograph that wasn’t already there: there was no surprise. The models that were a bit crappy could look great in the photos, because the photograph was the element that made them believable.’²²¹ [L.S.]