

The art of domestic life

People | Words Federico Monsalve



Marie Shannon creates art based around the mundane aspects of daily life, much of which is set in the home. Image: AJ Cox

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Marie Shannon has been making art that focuses on the home and domestic life for decades. Her emphasis on the seemingly mundane objects of everyday life often blends with stories and memories of her life with the late artist Julian Dashper and their son Leo. In view of the artist's two concurrent exhibitions, she spoke to Federico Monsalve

about her practice.

Federico Monsalve (FM): The home is a very important stage set for a lot of your work. Why?

Marie Shannon (MS): When I was at art school and first working with a large-format camera, I used to photograph very controlled, manicured gardens, such as the Savage Memorial. I was drawn to contained outdoor spaces that someone had already made sense of. Interiors were a natural progression from this. At that time, in the early 1980s, I was making panoramas, joining images together.

At some point, I began staging things for the camera – ordinary activities that had some kind of potential as images, which I could heighten by re-staging and photographing them. So, thematically, those images belonged inside the house, as that was where their genesis was. Also, on a practical level, working outside with a large-format view camera meant that I was often interrupted and distracted by camera enthusiasts wanting to know what kind of lens I was using, so that was definitely something to avoid.

FM: So, for the sake of those curious pedestrians, what kind of camera and lenses were you using?

MS: I was using a Linhof 4 x 5 view camera with a standard 150mm lens.

FM: In your video work, the act of remembering the objects that create a home seems crucial. Is this as a form of embalming them? A way of ‘photographing’ the emotions they carry?

MS: Yes, ordinary objects can be very powerful, and, of course, they are prompts for memories that may have nothing to do with their physical appearance or functional purpose. My video *The Rooms in the House* began with an idea I had in 1996 when our son was a baby. I looked around the house at our possessions – the things we had collected and displayed – and thought about the fact that they were now things in someone’s parents’ house, and that our son would grow up seeing these things differently from the way we saw them.

I wrote about this idea and started listing the objects around me in the living room. At that point, I had the idea of listing every item in the house, but of course, that was a huge task, which I never completed. I put the idea away until our son was 19, and left home to live in Amsterdam for a year. My plan was to interview him via Skype and ask him what he remembered from each room in the house, now that he was no longer living there.

I expected him to speak at length, about a large number of things, but he was very brief and didn't go into detail about the objects or his memories of them. At first, I was a bit put out, as I had imagined he would pretty much provide the whole text for the video. Then I realised that I could talk about the things he hadn't mentioned, as well as the few things he had. I could use the framework I had made for him to talk about whatever I wanted to.

I used the list-making device to juxtapose the mundane with the more meaningful, as they often are in life. Some things sit on a shelf because they remind us of people or places. Other things sit there because someone put them down one day and never got around to shifting them.

FM: When and how did you first become interested in exploring memory and domestic life through art?

MS: I've always enjoyed depicting, and heightening, the ordinary details, and the richness of interiors that had a clutter of objects hiding in plain sight, though they might not be the ostensible subject of the photograph. I first started using a large-format camera in 1981, and one of the things I loved about it was the potential for a very long depth of field. You can have the whole image sharp, from foreground to background, and the size of the negative (4 x 5 inches, or 10 x 12 centimetres) means that everything is rendered very smoothly and clearly. The viewer can see every object in the photograph clearly, whether it's important or incidental.

Now that I'm working more often in video, presenting texts in moving image (either through voiceover sound or text on screen), I like to present descriptions and accounts of objects and events that are grounded in the ordinary and the factual, but contain overt or implied emotional content. And of course, now that I'm using text, either on its own or with images, I can move more easily into the territory of memory.

FM: *In your What I'm Looking At video, you narrate the things you see while cataloguing the contents of your late husband Julian Dashper's art studio. There is a sentence that says: "Objects that are ambiguous must be kept until their meaning becomes clear." I get the feeling that statement applies to a lot of your work; this cataloguing of seemingly everyday objects from the home.*

MS: Yes, in fact in my practice ideas that are unresolved are sometimes kept for years, until I find the best way to express them. The accumulation of time, experience, and new information can help us to understand what things mean. As I described before, this was the case for *The Rooms in the House*. It was only after Leo grew up that the idea really took its proper shape.

I also think that my work has benefited from the passage of time. I've been working in this territory for more than 35 years, so the work I am doing now often sits easily with earlier work, or makes sense of earlier work in ways I couldn't have anticipated, or brings that work into the present.

FM: *For many years the world of home interiors was seen as the realm of the 'female', while the world of architecture was seen as 'masculine'. Do you think your work can or should be viewed through a gender lens?*

MS: I'm sure it can although I don't think it should. Men live in houses too. And we all have an interior life.

FM: *Your latest video pieces in Short Stories and Car Stories seem to be venturing outside of the home – car trips and vignettes about the neighbourhood (The Boy and the Girl in Beautiful Clothes). Do you see this as a new era in your practice?*

MS: Yes, I think it is. I think I'm also venturing further in my writing. At first, I was writing lists (*What I Am Looking At*), and editing existing text (Julian's faxes to me, in *The Aachen Faxes*), and describing physical objects (*The Rooms in the House*). In *Car Stories* I'm using each car as a prompt to talk about times and events in my life, whether related to cars or not. In *The Boy and the Girl in Beautiful Clothes*, *The Very Steep Driveway* and *Art School Class Trip*, I recall specific dramatic events. The challenge in writing those scripts was to craft a story without being heavy-handed with hindsight – to write from the present but to put myself in the past.

What these works have in common with the domestically located works is that they contain a lot of small, ordinary details.

FM: *As you mention, you use snippets from letters and faxes in your video works but they seem incredibly relevant and 'user-friendly' for the smartphone generation. Yet they are slower and more immersive. Did these technologies of textual communication in any way inform your video work?*

MS: It's hard to know. I certainly don't use any abbreviations or shortcuts I might use while texting. I don't use Twitter anymore, but I did for a while a few years ago, and it was very good training for being concise and clear. I followed people who were very literate, who clearly crafted their tweets very carefully. I think that was pretty educational.

FM: *What are you working on now?*

MS: Right now I'm having a little rest, after finishing four new videos for the show at Trish Clark. I work very slowly, so I spent a long time working on the scripts for them, then taking the moving images, and compiling the videos and texts. I need to think for a while now and let the new work settle before I decide what I want to do next.

Marie Shannon is exhibiting:

Short Stories, 17 June –21 July 2018 at [Trish Clark Gallery](#) in Auckland

Rooms found only in the home, 24 April–24 June 2018 at [Adam Art Gallery](#) in Wellington.