Building the Palace – Exhibition Review

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The year is 1002. "In the winter," observes the poet Sei Shōnagon, writing from the women's quarters in the imperial palace of the Empress Sadako, where she works as a court lady, "one sometimes catches the sound of a woman gently stirring the embers in her brazier. Though she does her best to be quiet, the man who is waiting outside hears her; he knocks louder and louder, asking her to let him in. Then the woman slips furtively towards the door where she can listen to him." Shōnagon continues, describing the women who open their doors when no one has knocked. When they do, the men nearby eye an opportunity and swiftly approach. But alas. As Shōnagon tells us,

"Since there is no room for them all to come in, many of them spend the rest of the night out in the garden – how charming."

Shōnagon's diary, *Makura no Sōshi* was first translated and published in English as *The Pillow Book* in 1928 by Arthur Waley. Among many things (literary classic, historical artefact, gossip column), it is a rich and vivid account of Japanese noble society during the country's Heian period. Indeed, when imagining the palace, it is easy to overlook the fact that such buildings were made to be lived in. Purposely sheltered and removed from the masses to maintain the hierarchies and rituals of aristocratic governance, the palace is artificially constructed in the public eye to represent an aloof and unattainable world. Yet, as Shōnagan and others demonstrate (in particular, I am thinking of Sofia Coppola's indie teen flick *Marie Antionette* (2006) and more recently, Prince Harry's confessional memoir *Spare* (2023)), the illicit and secretive happenings of the elites not only make for delicious cultural consumption, but also severs the imaginative boundaries between decency and impropriety that are spuriously set-up to separate "us" from "them."

This prompts the question: can a palace ever be a real home? I turn the idea over in my mind as I climb the stairs of the Nicholas Building, on my way to visit Sydney/Eora based composer and curator Mara Schwerdtfeger's recent exhibition *Building the Palace*, which ran from the 26th of April to the 20th of May 2023 at Blindside. It is a question asked by the exhibition and one that *The Pillow Book* answers in a direct testimony by detailing the quotidian realities of a life lived deep inside it. However, while Shōnagan fixed her attention exclusively on her private and elusive inner world, *Building the Palace* is multidirectional, zooming out and into broader concepts associated not only with the palace, but also, as the name tells us, the building process that allows it to exist. Wider still, the exhibition confronts relations between memory, real estate and architecture and their ability to "translate social and cultural change," according Schwerdtfeger's audio essay. Two accompanying texts provide further elaboration on the show's curatorial intention. In the first, *Unreal Real Estate*, Jennifer Cunningham contemplates what happens when versions of the familiar "[i]nvade our reality with something too strange to believe." In the second, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House*, Madeline Lo Booth discusses the exclusivity of housing and the material and psychological barriers younger generations face (and erect) when considering home ownership. Both texts tend towards a panoptic view of these themes, pondering outwardly to consider the concept of property as a form of boundless philosophical fixation.

Entering the gallery, I first encounter Cormac Kirby's work *Unit 4 / 411 Johnston Street According to Cormac Kirby* (2023) as a quiet invitation into the artist's home. The work is a white sheet of paper, held down by four rocks, that presents as a residential floor plan in the form of an open book of poetry. To view the tiny lines of text that make up the walls and borders of each room, I crouch on the ground and hover above it on my toes. My eyes linger over lines such as "doorway where your gung gung maybe once snored at me," the repetition of "dust ball" in different corners, and "Always open door/maybe for you but/maybe for some light." While visually stark (white paper, black text) I am struck by the work's intimacy, and Kirby's evident tenderness towards this home and the person that he shares it with.

Eventually looking up, I find a muted blue sky peering back at me. *Curtains* (2023), the work of artist collective Mori (Janelle Woo and Umi Graham) hangs elegantly in front of the window. Hanging towards the back of the room, its muslin and cotton texture suspends and softens the exhibition. On the second side of the gallery, I turn to find Hedwig Crombie's work, *Collection* (2023), a literal collection of different pieces of jewellery. There is a pearl necklace with delicately embossed figures attached to it, like a charm bracelet; there is a ring with a black stone at its centre and a tiny silver goblin-esque figure, holding a pink stone. Each piece feels comfortably situated next to the other, as if in conversation. Further down the wall and contrasting the minutiae of these objects is Fei Gao's wall-sized digital work, *Cosmic Quasar* (2023), which renders three dimensional Chinese characters into a visual iconography, dangling off telephone wires and transmission towers in an emptied industrial landscape.

Returning to the centre of the gallery, three different chairs constructed by Livo Tobler are seated, positioned at different points to each other in the shape of an orthogonal triangle. While works *Bergün Schtuel* (2022) and *13Al 002 Chair* (2023) are almost in direct opposition, *Wooyung Stump* (2023) faces away from the other, towards the wall of the gallery. The exhibition invites viewers to sit on these chairs to "experience their forms," according to a social media page dedicated to documenting the exhibition. At the time of viewing, however, I was unaware of this invitation.

Instead,
I circled each chair,
held back by scrutiny
rather than participation.

Had I sat down, I would have been given a better viewing of Anna Mould's *Breeding (Matrilineal II)* (2021), a mottled and watery painting depicting an ominous, angel-like figure with washed-out reddish eyes. Perhaps it is better, then, that I kept my distance. Across the room, another figure painted by Mould titled *Breeding (Patrilineal)* (2020) also appears to shelter from the angel, holding a soft hand across their forehead as they stare towards the ground.

Before leaving, I walk over to Miriam David's *Pyjama angel in my living room* (2020), *How to play chess* (2020) and *Juliette* (2020), three black and white linocut ink works (a fourth work, *Dining* (2019) is also included in the exhibition) to take a second squint. Discussing the work in the show's audio essay, David explains how lino cutting, as a medium, "works against you as a hard surface you are trying to cut into." Ultimately, the difficulty of this form can create "strange lines" with "jagged edges," resulting in unexpected movement and subversive forms that rupture the artist's ability to control the direction of their work. Up close, however, the gesticulating lines in David's work give the page a sense of motion that pulls out attention to various corners, and in turn, reveal each work's hidden details: a chess manual in *How to play chess,* two tall unlit candles in *Pyjama angel in my living room* and a perfectly shaped fish lying still on a dinner plate beside a vase of fresh flowers in *Dining*.

Set out in this way, the exhibition's layout takes the symbolic and structural figure of the palace and explores its many rooms. Here, the palace becomes more than a visual reminder of historic and contemporary elitism and, in certain contexts, colonial domination. Instead, the curator, writers, and artists each respond to the palace as a site of construction, allowing a multiplicity of ideas to complement and constrain each other in their co-existence.

The palace can be a home for some, and a home can be a palace for others.

Yet the dimensions of its exterior and interior remain unknowable intricacies, formed by persistent interactions with a specific place at a certain time that consequently take on their own, individualised significance. In this way, the exhibition answers its own question. Building the Palace tells us that, in the realm of fantasy and memory, a palace may become anything. But while some of us may be let inside, most of us will end up in the garden, among the weeds and the roses.