

READINGHOUSE

Bronwyn Lloyd

I left home that morning with a copy of *Bliss* tucked into the pocket of my pea-green coat. One of Penguin's series of Mini Modern Classics, the A6, grey-covered book contains three of Katherine Mansfield's stories: "Bliss," "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," and "The Doll's House." I always carry a book with me when I travel by bus, anticipating lengthy periods of waiting. Seated on the wooden bench beside Paper Moon, I read eight pages of *Bliss* before the bus arrived, closing the book at this passage:

Really – really – she had everything. She was young. Harry and she were as much in love as ever, and they got on together splendidly and were really good pals. She had an adorable baby. They didn't have to worry about money. They had this absolutely satisfactory house and garden. And friends – modern, thrilling friends, writers and painters and poets or people keen on social questions – just the kind of friends they wanted. And then there were books, and there was music, and she had found a wonderful little dressmaker, and they were going abroad in the summer, and their new cook made the most superb omelettes ...!

It's rare for any art or cultural activity happening in the city to be tempting enough for me to abandon my precious Saturday of writing or sewing, spruce myself up and catch the bus over the Harbour Bridge into town. But on that day I made an exception. Earlier in the week I had received an email from Hopkinson Cundy advertising an exhibition by Auckland artist Luke Willis Thompson with the run-together title, **inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam**.

What intrigued me about the promotional statement for Thompson's show was the news that the gallery was to be vacant for the duration of the exhibition (15–31 March 2012), and that the work itself was a property in Epsom, which visitors would be transported to by taxi and driven back into the city again afterwards.

The idea of being taken to a second location is a concept that has fascinated me ever since I watched an episode of *Oprah* some years ago that dealt with the subject of abduction. "Never get taken to the second location" was the catchy slogan that the invited guest asked the audience to commit to memory, claiming that once you allowed yourself to be removed from a familiar place and taken to unknown territory, your abductor had unlimited power and you had none. In various ways over the past few years, I've attempted to put this assertion about the second location to the test so, for that reason alone, the invitation to Luke Willis Thompson's exhibition was enough to entice me from my home.

My imagination went to work in the days leading up to the excursion and I began to speculate about what I was likely to experience at Thompson's exhibition. My best guess was that visitors would be taken to a place that would later be revealed as the scene of some terrible crime. People who know me would not be surprised that I would think of something dark and sinister, but it was actually the exhibition blurb itself that got me thinking along these lines:

Thompson's conceptual practice exists in both tangible and intangible forms. In recent work the artist has borrowed ready-made objects – such as a local funeral home's art collection and a black minstrel-style figure from an antique store – to trace the faultlines of race and class in his chosen context. Thompson's objects are often taken from sites of trauma or contain references to the artist's biography, but these are rarely made explicit.

Thompson sets up estranging encounters where the viewer is invited to engage with a marginal object both ontologically and pushed into a fictional space of narrative and mythology.

After reading that, there was no way that I was going to miss out on this opportunity, not only to get taken to a mystery second location, but to a place where we were actively encouraged to construct a story, or multiple stories, based on our experience there. I invited my writer friend Isabel to come along, and at one o'clock on Saturday afternoon, 17 March 2012, we climbed into a taxi parked in the loading bay adjoining Hopkinson Cundy and were taken on a very strange adventure.

Before I describe the experience, let me state for the record that I am, in many ways, an old-fashioned kind of art historian, in the sense that I tend to respond to works in which I can see evidence of the hand and the mind working together to create it. I have a strong aversion to exhibitions in which artists treat their audience as patsies, playing silly tricks on them involving appropriation, irony, and misdirection.

While adopting an open mind towards Thompson's exhibition, on the surface at least, I admit that I harboured deep-seated reservations about the idea of a house in Epsom as the 'artwork,' in light of my antipathy towards an earlier example of a residence used as an artwork in an exhibition by Dane Mitchell.

When Mitchell was awarded an artist residency in 2006 at the Thorndon cottage formerly owned by Rita Angus, the work he undertook during his stay at the cottage was a reading of the paranormal activity of Rita Angus's house, in the expectation that he might learn something about the artist and her life. Mitchell employed the services of a psychic and recorded her findings, which revealed, among other things, that Angus ate a lot of toast, and that she enjoyed the solitude and creative freedom that the house offered her, but was at the same time troubled by her seclusion. The psychic told Mitchell that Angus would help him with his work if he wished her to, and that upon leaving her home he should leave a bunch of daffodils on the table for Angus, which he did.

"Thresholds," the exhibition that resulted from Mitchell's residency, was held at the Jonathan Smart Gallery in Christchurch in April 2007. The show included framed pencil rubbings on paper of the plaque affixed to the gate of Angus's cottage and of the text engraved on Angus's headstone at the Wharerangi cemetery in Napier. There was an audio recording of the psychic's reading, and a monitor placed on the gallery floor playing a looped recording of a squeaky hinge on one of the doors in the cottage that evidently sounded like a woman's voice saying the name 'Dane.'

The sum of Mitchell's investigation of Rita Angus's phantom inhabitation of her Wellington residence was as insubstantial as the spectre he sought to make contact with, but as the taxi drove us through the gentrified streets of some of Auckland's earliest established suburbs, past Cornwall Park and into the heart of Epsom, I actively suppressed any misgivings I had about Luke Willis Thompson's exhibition, unfairly influenced by Dane Mitchell's work, and gave in to a growing sense of nervous anticipation.

We tried to retain our bearings as the taxi veered off Manukau Road and took an unexpected short-cut through a block of units that backed onto the street with the house we were going to view. Presumably, this shortcut was designed to ensure that we didn't see the street sign on the corner, thereby providing the residence, and its owner, with a degree of anonymity.

The cab turned right into a tree-lined street and right again into the driveway of an imposing old villa with a wide verandah running around two sides of the house. A variety of furniture was stacked up around the porch and a young woman, seated on a white sofa by the front door, greeted us as we climbed the steps. We laughed self-consciously and asked if there were any instructions for viewing the house. "None," she said. "Just go in and look around at your leisure." She turned the handle and ushered us in, closing the door behind us.

We found ourselves in a wide hallway. The two bedrooms to the left and right of the front door were wedged closed with a pair of undies. We assumed this meant that access was denied. The hall cut a path through the centre of the house from front to back or, at least, such a path would have been possible if the hallway hadn't been cluttered with piles of stuff. The stale-smelling, dark passage was clearly the main dumping ground for the family's overflow of furniture, papers, clothes, and toys. Rubbish bags filled to capacity sagged on the floor; stuffed toys lay face down on the carpet, like a child had staged a crime scene, and towards the far end of the hall, two cupboards on either side spilled their contents into the space, blocking the way through.



Figure 1. Luke Willis Thompson, *inthisholeonthislandwhereiam* (2012). Image courtesy the artist and Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland.

At this early point we were definitely thinking that someone, perhaps a crazy hoarder, had recently died in the house, but that theory was put to rest when we noticed that the bathroom had been used that morning, indicating that the house was currently lived in. This was confirmed when we turned left off the hallway into the large dining room and encountered life – a handsome grey cat was sleeping soundly on a wooden chair positioned in a sunbeam under the window.

There was a different atmosphere in this room, maybe because of the presence of the contented cat, or maybe because of the contrast between the hallway and the dining room, which was comparatively free of clutter; with a clear wooden table, dusted surfaces, and high ceilings that had been made cobweb-free with the aid of a long-handled brush propped in a corner.

The adjoining lounge was similarly tidy, with neatly ordered bookcases filled with gilt-edged classics, popular fiction and children's books, and framed family photos arranged with care around the walls and on top of the shelves. Isabel observed that the father was not present in any of the photos and we began to evolve a narrative about a solo mother who wanted to be in control of her life, but who was only able to make half-hearted attempts at establishing order.

When we entered the small kitchen at the back of the house, for instance, Isabel saw evidence of domestic order: The green rubber gloves neatly folded over the edge of the sink comforted her strangely. She noticed that the family cat was fed the most expensive brand of dry cat food, and she later remarked that she only bought that brand for her own cat, Nintendo, when it was on special at the supermarket. There were two bags of Optimum on top of the fridge, and Isabel noted that somebody had gone to the trouble of squeezing the air out of the bags before sealing them shut to keep the cat-biscuits fresh.

Examining the magnetic text, I thought about the way the artist had run the title of his show together into one long word: **inthisholeonthislandwhereiam**. I saw that there was a line of text centred at the very top of the fridge door that formed a poetic couplet of sorts with Thompson's title: **meanwhileyouclimbontheforestedcoolsnowrightabovetheseasunland**. The act of placing the two lines together generates a narrative of escape – a story about climbing out of the hole, crossing the snow and finding oneself above the sea, the sun, the land. Fanciful, I know, but when I find myself without interpretive parameters, as I did in that Epsom house/artwork, I feel compelled to seek out sense, and textual clues are always the first thing I look for to find my bearings. The magnetic text offered me that.

I could see that there were limitations to the variety of magnetic text possibilities on the fridge door because the original set of magnetic poetry, grubby with age and use, was significantly depleted. More recently, it had been supplemented by a set of travel words, but these thematic sets aren't nearly as good, in my opinion, because they limit the options for expressing ideas. Nevertheless, the little groupings of text on the fridge door, combining travel words and regular words, were like small islands of sense (and nonsense) in a wide white sea: **visitcheapwarmFijiparadiseisland**.

When I noticed the stand alone phrase **notrandom** on the fridge door, I declared aloud that this was incontrovertible proof that the artist had staged certain items around the house that we were supposed to notice. The narrative of escape was deliberate, I argued, and Isabel laughed at my obsessive investigative tendencies. From that point on, however, we began to notice things in earnest.

In three separate places around the house we found stacks of sheet music. On top of each pile was a Requiem, and we wondered if this was connected to the memorial pamphlet displayed on the mantelpiece for a pastor who had died in 2008. Death, after all, is the ultimate escape.

We discovered further textual evidence related to the idea of escape in the two open bedrooms of the house. A copy of Truman Capote's novel *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, with its famously unattached and nomadic protagonist, Holly Golightly (played by Audrey Hepburn in the screen adaptation), was positioned face-out on a small bookshelf in the bedroom of a young woman. In an otherwise chaotic room, with an unmade bed and dirty clothes all over the floor, the chic image of Hepburn facing into the room told us a story about a girl's desire for something greater than her present circumstances afforded. The care with which the young woman had arranged her many pairs of cheap but much-loved shoes in a neat grid on the floor of her room was further evidence, Isabel argued, of the girl's aspiration for status and wealth. I didn't tell Isabel that she was standing on the peel-off strip from a sanitary pad while she was talking.

The bedroom next door was slightly more orderly, although the bed was also unmade. Photographs of four smiling young Pacific Island adults were scattered over the bed, along with an unread collection of Katherine Mansfield's short stories. On a shelf above the open wardrobe stood an illustrated copy of Edward Lear's nonsense poem "The Owl and the Pussycat." An escapist tale if ever there was one, the poem recounts the adventure of two creatures that fall in love and set sail together in their pea-green boat for a new life in a new land where they are married under the light of the moon and dance hand in hand along the sandy shore.

It wasn't until we saw the photographs on the bed that we became aware that the family who owned this house were of Pacific Island origin on their father's side, judging by the photographs in the lounge of a Palagi woman we assumed was the children's mother. A birth certificate sitting on top of a pile of papers in the hallway confirmed this hunch. The certificate was for a girl, born in the early '90s, whose father was 51 at the time of her birth. He was Fijian and worked as a primary school principal.

Another detail that we noticed on the birth certificate was that the artist shared the same surname as the father named on the document. Although we had been told by the gallery owner that the home we were viewing

belonged to friends of the artist who had had a similar upbringing, it was apparent that this was not the case and that Luke Willis Thompson had in fact situated his latest work in his own family home.

Standing in the hallway, our conversation turned to the subject of Pacific Island families living in gentrified Auckland suburbs. We talked about the way that such families had been systematically squeezed out of Ponsonby during the property boom in the 1990s and we wondered if this family had experienced similar pressures in Epsom to sell their property and relocate. We imagined that the shabby state of their home drew a fair amount of interest from real estate agents as well as raised eyebrows from those home-owners living in the expensively renovated villas down the street.

Flicking through a pile of blue-covered Auckland Grammar School grade-books in the hall, Isabel commented on the cruelty of publicising the details of the students who had received failing grades for their subjects and how humiliated they must have felt. A discussion about elitism in New Zealand education followed. I told Isabel about an occasion some years ago when I had attended parent-teacher interviews at Auckland Girls' Grammar School on behalf of my Samoan mother-in-law at the time, whose youngest daughter was failing most of her classes. I described the surprised look on the faces of Shiree's teachers when I introduced myself to them, and how mortified I was to hear their condescending assessment of her future prospects. She should get a job at McDonalds, I was told by more than one teacher, and save up to buy a car.

After conversing in the hallway for some time, we suddenly became self-conscious. We wondered if there were cameras hidden around the house and whether our conversation and movements were being recorded. We started to question whether or not we had said anything inappropriate. At that point, we felt it was a good idea to leave.

Returning to Hopkinson Cundy we were struck by the contrast between the cluttered house in Epsom and the empty exhibition space with dark polished floors and bare white walls. It was the visual equivalent of a mind-clearing exercise at the end of a hypnosis session, returning us to the familiar reality of our own lives.

Discussing the experience over a glass of wine at Alleluya, we realised that the long, dank and cluttered hallway in the house had had the greatest impact on us. While we had been able to invent stories about personal improvement, coping devices and escape in the rooms leading off the hall, in that dark space, filled with debris and blocked at one end, it seemed that little hope existed.

Thinking about it later, I realised that the hallway of the Epsom house was the locus of our 'estranging encounter'. The hallway was the uneasy and tremulous faultline of race and class and Luke Willis Thompson had placed us right on it.

Bronwyn Lloyd completed a PhD in English at the University of Auckland in 2010. She currently teaches academic and creative writing at Massey University, School of English and Media Studies (Albany), and works as a freelance writer and curator.

1 Katherine Mansfield, *Bliss*, Mini Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 8-9.