



Small Change: Big Impact

Maria Hildrick by June Moorhouse

“I work a lot from my own personal history and images from my own history”

Flipping through family photographs turns up many similar shots where the zealous parent or unsure photographer took another one, ‘just in case’. And in that shutter gap, what happened? On the surface it seems, looking at the images, not much. But for artist Maria Hildrick these moments in time opened up a world worthy of intense exploration that led to the exhibition of paintings, *Small Changes*, on show at Paper Mountain earlier this year.

Using images from her own collection of family snaps, and others of Australian wildlife, Maria created ‘pairs’ of paintings that draw viewers in to seek out the differences and reflect on their meaning. There’s a gradation in the pairs, from those that are obviously different (the wildlife paintings and those of graveside domes – a recurring fascination) to those of her family where the difference is subtle. The final blast comes with the exhibition’s eponymous pair (tableaux of mother, daughter and baby) that requires close examination to identify the change.

At one level, the viewing experience is playfully reminiscent of ‘spot the difference’

cartoons; but as life teaches us and this body of work conveys, family dynamics and interrelations seldom conform to the simple, carefree look projected by family albums.

Maria’s childhood was spent in Ireland with parents who were restless and would move on when obstacles appeared. Six to 12 months was a long stay in one place until she reached high school at which point, despite moving home, the family stayed in Dunleary for the duration. After high school Maria went straight to art school and a year after that set off travelling with her fella, which, four years ago, brought them to Australia. Her constant changing surroundings reflects in her work.

“I work a lot from my own personal history and images from my own history. My work focussed on objects for a long time and the value we place on objects because it was always those objects that would come with us and make a place home.

“Also, part of my subject matter is that my mother was a schizophrenic, so looking at *Small Changes*, some of (the photographs) are quite stark and some are quite subtle and they illustrate



her state of mind at that time. I wanted to explore change through those images but also use imagery of more obvious change that I had taken myself, like ‘whole’ and ‘broken’, ‘alive’ and ‘dead’, ‘movement’ and ‘stillness’, to be a clue that when you look at something that almost looks identical, there are actually changes in there.”

The matter of fact way that Maria shares painful aspects of her family history (her mother committed suicide when Maria was 17) is reflected in the paintings. There is nothing mawkish about the work.

“Although it is my experience I do see it as just a human experience,” she says, pointing out that she’s not the only person to have a schizophrenic mother or to lose a parent to suicide or to have moved frequently. “All these experiences are ones that lots of people all over the world have had.”

True. But it’s also true that it takes an artist’s discipline and talent to use these experiences and the small changes of life to create expressive and moving work. ☺

← Maria Hildrick, *Eileen felt her own absence*, 2012. Oil, ink and graphite on canvas, 20 x 24 inches. Image courtesy of the artist

➔ Maria Hildrick with paintings of herself as a child. Image courtesy of the artist