

A B O O K S O U T



Killara, kitchen table

'The Right Colour in the Right Place'

JURGIS MIKSEVICIUS

In a relatively compact house in Killara, Sydney, the artist Jurgis Miksevicius (1923–2014) continued to paint, overpaint and repaint elements of the interior architecture for 50 years. The results may be seen in a series of fantastic images documenting this affectionate, rich and warm process.

Originally a way of dealing with the decay of peeling paint, Jurgis' process became an aesthetic practice, overlaid with elements of an obsessive domestic ritual. The complex narratives of his art were built up of painted walls, ceilings, doors and built-in furniture. This was overlaid with a salon-style hang of his more traditionally formatted painted canvases and colour development works, often painted

'The right colour in the right place'—from
Jurgis Miksevicius Portraits Real and Imagined, Carolyn Leigh, p.18

on whatever came to hand, such as tin lids and gem scone trays. In addition the mix included the more traditional elements of comfort in a domestic space at that time. A standard lamp, a TV, a tray holding a beautiful silver tea service and a comfortable green armchair hint at those who occupied these rooms.

The resulting visual impact is of an unbelievably rich, multi-layered, trans-historical, immersive environment that is at once playful and yet serious in intent. Miksevicius has stated that his work is not decorative in purpose. Instead

he says: *If I don't draw or don't paint something, they can escape or elude me, once I have done it, it stays with me.*

If you think about these domestic spaces as immersive environments, ones that can be read in the contemporary context of the practice of installation, Jurgis can be seen to be effecting those who experience the spaces and creating an affect—an embodied experience independent of consciousness or representation.

By chance when starting this essay I re-read an article by Jeanette Winterson published in *The Guardian* in 2002. She wrote that when discussing the purpose of art 'even Duchamp's readymades were a way of forcing us to concentrate on the thing in itself as it really is'. What that thing in itself reveals is its authentic presence where spirit and object have not been separated.

The apparent need by Miksevicius to develop, expand and



Killara, dINETTE



*This page: Killara, lounge room with fireplace
Opposite page, Killara, lounge room showing hallway*

make visible this inseparable connection between the object and its authentic presence or soulfulness may be based in his training in Germany after World War II.

He studied art at a school run on Bauhaus principles of training, education and process, the Darmstadt Werkstätten der Bildenden Kunst, where he was taught by Professor Paul Thesing. Partially as a response to World War I and increasing industrialisation, the Bauhaus movement developed out of a desire to create environments which positively influence people, as a

counter to social disintegration and individual alienation. One of the primary utopian Bauhaus concepts is the ideal of the creation of an inclusive work where form and function coincide and all of the modalities of art and craft are brought together, collapsing the boundaries between high art, architecture and craft.

The domestic environments painted and constructed by Miksevicius over many years certainly collapse the boundaries both in terms of the artificial divisions between high art/painting and architecture; between

painting and craft; between painting and interior design, and even between art and life. By taking the process back to one of the fundamental questions he has blurred the edges of what could be considered an appropriate surface on which to paint. In doing so Jurgis has worked to destroy the safe boundaries of the known domestic in suburbia. For him it made no difference if it were a wall, a ceiling, a stretched canvas or a tin lid. All of these are simply surfaces on which to paint, on which to respond as an artist or painter. The authentic nurturing presence of the home—painted with the right colour in the right place with the intention of positively influencing the people who interacted with the space by reinforcing the sensual qualities of daily life—were the ideas that informed this seemingly ephemeral practice.

Miksevicius' early life experiences of home understandably appear to have strongly influenced his artistic approach to the domestic or the idea of home. He was born in 1923 in Lithuania. In 1940 he fled the Soviet invasion with his family to Germany where he stayed and studied until leaving for Australia in 1948. He settled initially in a migrant camp at Bathurst, and then lived in Canberra where he met and married his wife Elva. In 1953 the family finally settled in Killara, a suburb on the North Shore of Sydney. The house in Killara was designed by Jurgis and both he and his wife helped to build it.

An important factor in this collapse of the art-life boundaries in the environments is that for the first few years Jurgis' studio was not separated from the house. He painted in the lounge room where the paraphernalia of his studio became integrated into domestic life. This layering of his studio into the house would have assisted the blurring of the boundaries between art and life and certainly the boundaries between art and domestic life. In



the early days in Australia an instruction from his German teacher, Professor Paul Thesing—to focus on putting the right colour in the right place—became a quest which was played out in the interior domestic space of a compact house in Killara as Jurgis adjusted to the altered colour balance of Australian light.

Often in the context of the increasingly commoditisation of the suburban Sydney house as a store of value, other Australian artists such as Howard Arkley, Dale Hickey and Callum Morton have responded to suburbia and the domestic, by forming often unpopulated critiques in both objects and paintings. Many of Arkley's paintings are representations of houses constructed of brightly coloured and patterned surfaces yet devoid of people or the evidence of their presence. Jurgis on the other hand removed himself from the commercial art market and so wasn't paid to make or sell these works. They weren't part of the cultural production of the market but instead form part of the social and cultural capital of his life, of his community and of his country.

The interior environments documented in this series of photographs are a delightful addition to the Australian artistic response to the home. They do not form a critique; instead Miksevicius' paintings could be seen as a form of performance, a repetitive, ritualised domestic performance where what for him was a daily domestic practice of painting became a heightened aesthetic experience.

While the tradition of Australian artists responding to suburbia is to produce an unpopulated critique, the environments created by Jurgis (although documented in this instance without the physical people in the image) can be felt to be the sites of an active family life, involving the five family members who regularly ate at the kitchen table. These spaces were inhabited and engaged with and in the images of these environments it is possible to see them as characters, playing a role in this domestic life, rich in a trans-historical context moulded by Jurgis to nurture them all.

Fiona Davies

References

Jeanette Winterson: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2002/nov/25/art.artsfeatures1> (accessed October 2016)

Jurgis Miksevicius' art and life can be previewed online: Carolyn Leigh, *Jurgis Miksevicius —Portraits Real and Imagined*, <http://au.blurb.com/b/7260678-jurgis-miksevicius-portraits-real-and-imagined>

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