

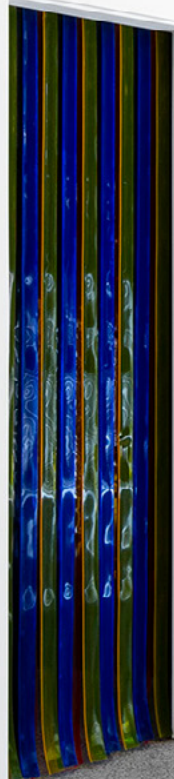
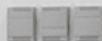


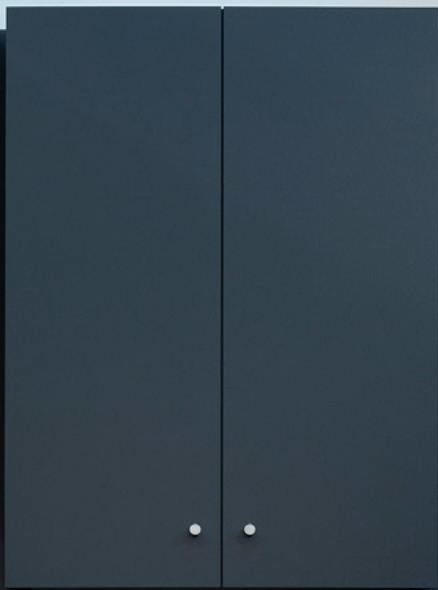
Shannon Lyons: Dark Kitchen

16 November 2019 to 14 March 2020

Guest Curator: Laura Coultie







White Cubes and Dark Kitchens

Laura Couttie

Over the summer months, visitors to Heide Museum of Modern Art may be surprised to discover a kitchen in one of the galleries. Entering through either one of two identical doorways, each hung with colourful plastic curtains, you will find yourself in a darkened room. In the narrowest corner, the small kitchen is installed in monotone grey, like a *tableau vivant*, or living picture, that might prompt the question, why is it there? *Dark Kitchen*, by Shannon Lyons, is a newly commissioned site-specific exhibition that responds to the social and institutional histories of Heide Museum of Modern Art, and to the specific physical environment of the Project Gallery.

Lyons is a multi-disciplinary artist who focuses on unpacking the complex relationships that exist between artistic content and context. Her works take the form of installations, sculptures, gestures and interventions that critically examine and reflect upon the sites where they are made and exhibited. In the process of conceptualising a new work, Lyons spends significant time at a site, observing the environment, the way spaces function, and how people move through and interact with them. After which, she moves onto more scholastic forms of research and enquiry. *Dark Kitchen* continues Lyons' interest in exploring the contemporary art gallery as a site brimming with political, personal and poetic content.

In developing her ideas for this exhibition, Lyons was inspired by Heide's unique history as a home and community for artists, writers and intellectuals, which was central to the Melbourne art scene in the mid-twentieth century. 'I'm drawn to the kitchen and living spaces in the Heide Cottage and Heide Modern and the stories I've heard and read about John and Sunday Reed—the afternoon teas, the communal tables full of home cooking. Sharing, conversing, arguing—being human', she says.¹ Life at Heide for John and Sunday, and the artists who lived with them on and off over the years, was centered around the kitchen and dining areas, with the preparing and sharing of meals an important feature of each day.

1. Conversation with the artist, Melbourne, 2019.

A typical day at Heide began with John waking Sunday and any houseguests at seven o'clock with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice...Breakfast was at eight o'clock and invariably consisted of eggs, usually boiled or scrambled, wholegrain toast with Heide butter, homemade marmalade or jam and plenty of tea.²

2. Lesley Harding and Kendrah Morgan, *Sunday's Kitchen: Food & Living at Heide*, The Miegunyah Press, University of Melbourne, and Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2010, p. 21.

Over the past six or so months, Lyons and I met regularly to discuss our project and, over cups of coffee and glasses of wine, these conversations turned to the issues that are concerning us. What quickly emerged was a shared concern about the increasing digitisation of our world and the negative effect that has on meaningful human connections. In thinking about the community that existed at Heide, we reflected that contemporary society is moving us further away from the personal interaction we need and desire. Ironically, in our conversations over the table, we were enacting the very form of togetherness that we were reminiscing.



Heide II Kitchen c.1975,
photographer unknown, Heide
Museum of Modern Art Archive

3. Felix Bröcker, 'Food as a Medium Between Art and Cuisine', in Nicolaj van der Meulen, Jörg Wiesel (eds.), *Culinary Turn: Aesthetic Practice of Cookery*, Transcript Verlag, 2017, p. 176.

From our origins as hunter-gatherers, the sharing of food has played an important role in community building. Felix Bröcker, a chef and academic who focuses on the intersection between art and food, has written extensively on 'the social power of a shared meal'. He notes: 'From the symposiums of the Greeks to the Last Supper and from business lunches to dining clubs and modern political banquets, meal-time gatherings are a powerful symbol of human togetherness.'³ However, it seems that the kitchen, which has been the heart of these activities, may be under threat. According to investment bank UBS who published a report in 2018 titled 'Is the Kitchen Dead?', the current trend in online food delivery services is set to increase. They estimate that by the year 2030, most meals currently cooked at home will instead be ordered online and delivered from restaurants or 'dark kitchens'.⁴

4. UBS Investment Bank, In Focus, 'Is the Kitchen Dead?', 18 June 2018, <https://www.ubs.com/global/en/investment-bank/in-focus/2018/dead-kitchen.html>, accessed 2 December 2019.

Before this year I had never heard the term 'dark kitchen', although, like many people who order food online, I had probably eaten food prepared in one. Also referred to as 'ghost kitchens' or 'virtual kitchens', these rather sinisterly named establishments are a recent innovation, developed to service the growing food delivery industry. They operate out of public sight, such as in shipping containers or warehouses, to produce meals exclusively for the online orders market. Designed for minimal social interaction and maximum efficiency, they function as conveyor belts for production, pick up and distribution. Dark kitchens have no shop fronts, no conventional bricks and mortar dining rooms, and no opportunity for customers to dine-in and share a meal with family or friends outside of the home. Lyons and I are both interested in posing the question: what do we lose as a society—and as a creative community—when we lose a communal space for sharing food and ideas?

At one level, Lyons' installation is a homage to the communal and convivial environments that have existed at Heide since the early 1930s when the Reeds first came to live at the property. *Dark Kitchen* makes reference to the kitchen and living spaces that are still on display to visitors: the original farmhouse known as Heide Cottage, and the 1960s architectural residence Heide Modern. During a tour of the buildings, we were delighted to discover that the back-of-house scullery currently used by Heide staff and volunteers is, in fact, the original kitchen designed for Sweeney Reed's apartment.

The purpose-built museum, Heide Galleries, is the only building on the property designed solely for the display of art. The Project Gallery is a trapezoidal space situated within this building. On early site visits, Lyons observed the specific architecture of the Project Gallery and its function as a thoroughfare, connecting the reception, ticket desk and retail space with the Albert and Barbara Tucker Gallery. Her interest was sparked not only by the challenge of the gallery's physical environment, but also by its clear connection to the commercial activities that nowadays accompany the experience of visiting a museum.

Art institutions, far from being neutral spaces, are driven by their own ideological guidelines and agendas. Museums are now considered both cultural and entertainment destinations, and the consumerist spaces of the café and retail store are now understood to be key parts of the museum experience. Lyons has long been interested in the 'behind-the-scenes' spaces—the spaces that we don't see (within an institution), and the activities that occur within them. 'In past projects I've turned the back rooms



out, shone a light on them, put them on display', she says.⁵ Several of her previous works have drawn attention to the revenue-raising activities, such as coffee carts, cafes and shops, which now inevitably sit side-by-side with traditional museum and gallery activities.

5. Conversation with the artist, Melbourne, 2019.

For *Dark Kitchen*, Lyons has accentuated the nature of the Project Gallery as a thoroughfare between the retail and artistic activities of the museum. Upon entering the gallery from the reception area, an unsuspecting visitor may be unaware of the largest, yet most subtle, intervention the artist has made into the space. A wall bisects the room, painted in the same shade of white as the rest of the gallery walls. It blends so seamlessly with the museum's interior that one could easily pass straight through the gallery on their way to the next room without stopping to notice the installation. However, the subtle addition of architraves and skirting boards on the inserted wall, differentiating it from the standard gallery walls, serves to domesticate the institutional space, pointing towards Heide's historical origins as a residence.

The installation contains recognisable features of a kitchen—a sink, cupboards, space for a fridge and power points. But, the sink is not connected to piping, the cupboards don't open and the power points are superficial. Rather than a functioning kitchen, the installation operates as a mirage, or signifier of a kitchen. Lyons has taken inspiration from workplace kitchenettes, motel rooms and display homes—spaces that provide the basic functions or look of a kitchen, but without the homeliness. In her wider practice, Lyons often playfully blurs boundaries between the functional and non-functional: a coffee cart that has

the appearance of functionality (complete with barista) but does not function, or a kitchenette that has functioning coffee facilities, but its structure and positioning signpost it as an art installation rather than permanent feature. Often, the decision to leave wooden beams and other support structures visible provides a hint to the viewer that all is not what it appears. In this work, the reverse side of the wall is uncladded, deliberately left ‘unfinished’ as a reference to façades or stage sets; sites of performance that encourage us to think about our performativity and role within the institution.

Writer and curator Jens Hoffman uses the term ‘epic theatre’ to describe his proposition that the exhibition is ‘a stage set in which the objects on display are performers.’ In this understanding, the context and content become the ‘performers’. But additionally, in Hoffman’s ideal exhibition, viewers bring their own experiences and understandings to the work, becoming additional performers in the exhibition with their various interpretations allowing for multiple readings.⁶ For Lyons, the exhibition is itself the artistic medium, and a site of potential; and the viewer is integral to the exhibition.

6. Jens Hoffman, *Theatre of Exhibitions*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2015, p. 28.

By inserting the false wall into the space, Lyons has deliberately emphasised the passage-like nature of the gallery, drawing a parallel between the gallery and the design of ‘dark kitchens’. The kitchen is entered and exited via two doorways at either end of the space—like a delivery driver, the gallery visitor can enter in one door and exit out the other. *Dark Kitchen* deliberately makes a behind-the-scenes space visible for the public to see, but, at the same time, obscures it from view. By shining a light on an activity that usually





occurs behind closed doors, Lyons infuses the supposedly non-commercial, contemplative space of the museum with a commentary on contemporary capitalist structures. She has created an environment that positions the consumption of food with the consumption of art, encouraging audiences to consider the relationships between the two activities, and their own role as a participant. The viewer is positioned as an active participant who must choose to pass through the doorways and engage with the art, rather than walking past.

Hanging in the doorways to the kitchen are multi-coloured plastic strip curtains, reminiscent of the entrances to milk bars, corner stores and convenience shops that, until recently, were commonplace in suburban neighbourhoods. Growing up in an inner-city suburb of Melbourne, my parents would walk up the street to the local milk bar every morning to buy milk and the newspaper. The family who ran the milk bar were part of the community, and the overlapping daily routines of the neighbours created a sense of companionship and belonging. With the growth of supermarket chains and online grocery orders, and the increase in people accessing their daily news online, these shops are fast disappearing. The rainbow-coloured strip curtains in the installation, manufactured to the artist's specifications, provide a nostalgic nod to the nearly-extinct neighbourhood store, as well as a hint to audiences that the wall is not merely part of the gallery architecture.

Dark Kitchen is deliberately dark; it is intended to be critical. Yet the darkness of the installation is countered with moments of lightness. The grey interior is injected with colourful lines of light filtering through the plastic curtains. A solitary object has been placed on the bench,

almost bizarre in its unexpected appearance: a plastic, orange-coloured citrus juicer. Made by Melbourne brand 'British Plastics', the object is functional, yet sits unused, held in a state of suspense. The juicer itself holds a special significance for the artist, being the only item she took from her mother's kitchen when she moved out of home, and then brought with her when she moved from Perth to Melbourne. A nod to the freshly squeezed orange juice that John Reed served every morning, this object offers a hint of human presence, and hope, to the dark kitchen.

List of Works

Shannon Lyons

Dark Kitchen 2019

pine, plasterboard, synthetic polymer paint, MDF,
IKEA 'BOHOLMEN' sink, IKEA 'LEDBERG' LED
lighting strip, cabinet knobs, cable clips, PVC strip
doors and British Plastics citrus squeezer
installation dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Biography

Shannon Lyons was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1984. She currently lives in Melbourne where she works as an artist and educator. Shannon was awarded a practice-led PhD in Visual Art from Curtin University in 2016, and received a Bachelor of Arts (Art) (First Class Honours) from Curtin University in 2008.

In 2004 Lyons was selected to participate in the Fondazione Antonio Ratti Advanced Course in Visual Arts with visiting Professor Jimmie Durham in Como, Italy.

She was a visiting scholar at the E'cole Nationale Supérieur d'Art de Dijon (ENSAD) in 2008, and completed a residency at SOMA in Mexico City, Mexico in 2012.

Recent projects include *Wayfind* (2018, Next Wave x West Space), *Infrastructuralism* (2018, La Trobe Art Institute) and *A dead mouse and a broken coffee machine* (2018, Bus Projects).

Acknowledgements

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Laura Couttie would like to thank Sue Cramer and Julia Powles for sharing their knowledge and experience and for their support throughout the exhibition process, and Lesley Harding for providing this wonderful opportunity. Most of all, Laura would like to thank Shannon Lyons for approaching this project with such thoughtfulness and professionalism.

Both Shannon and Laura acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, the custodians of the land on which Heide Museum of Modern Art stands. It is a privilege for us to live and work on this land, and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future.

Produced on the occasion of the exhibition:

Shannon Lyons: Dark Kitchen
Guest Curated by Laura Coultie

HEIDE
MUSEUM
OF MODERN
ART

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Kerry Gardner & Andrew Myer Project Gallery
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Installation view, *Shannon Lyons: Dark Kitchen* 2019
Photography: Christian Capurro

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Heide Museum of Modern Art acknowledges the Wurundjeri
people of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners of the
land upon which Heide stands, paying respects to their
Elders past, present and emerging.

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