
GEORGIE HILL
FEINT

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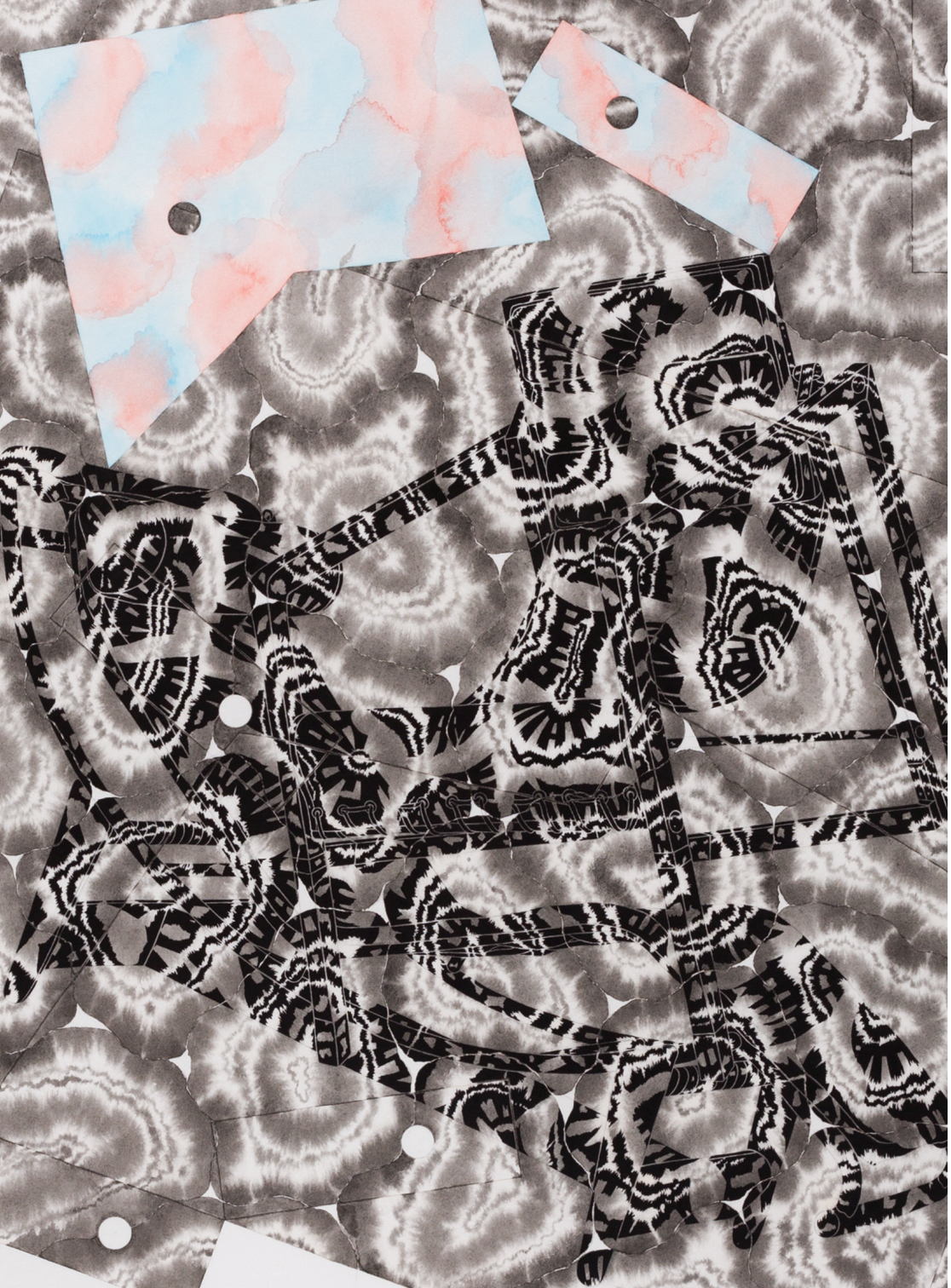


Feint

A feint is a performance. A movement that implies one thing and achieves another, that suggests deftness and the sidestep as well as, ultimately, the well-aimed *coup de main*. This performance is already taking place as we enter Georgie Hill's exhibition at City Gallery Wellington. The gallery is nearly bare. Two bright white empty walls face each other, left and right. Along the far wall hang five dark-framed pieces, evenly spaced. Large enough that their pulses of bright red signal a clear bodily message—blood or sex or danger. Yet small enough within the surrounding empty walls that they insist on inspection. We are too far away to make out detail. The presentation's knowing *sotto voce* is its own form of manoeuvre. A faintness that is itself a feint. If you want to see us, this hanging says, you're going to have to get closer.

Ushered in by those white walls we seek a better sense of what these artworks are made of. The red has a strangely pulsing, cushioned vitality. Their bright blood-jet colour is overlaid in careful, precise pencil work. The finished effect suggests coral or blossom, the stamen of pohutukawa, the stylised iconography of Japanese chrysanthemum. Yet that repeated organic underlay is also disquietingly human. Alveoli, blood-suffused tissue. In a similar bid for foothold, we see that the watercolour patterning in subsequent works suggests cartography. They're reminiscent of aerial maps of cities, with the dark density of human life and the white of roads. There's also a reminder of the ragged precision of a geode cross-section. Or maybe an outcropping of mould, spore growth—something that spreads organically, swiftly, silent.

One of Hill's tactical manoeuvres, it seems, is to unsettle our understanding of pattern, particularly its historical associations with the feminine. Her works' repeated textures lead us in with their sense of familiarity, their promise of representative stability. Then they slip past into their own territories, which are altogether more unsettling and unresolved and strange. Just as we parse a finely scored stamen-like red as floral, it shifts into viscera. Moth wing or hard-edged crystal blends into

the patterns of rampant decay. They remind us that pattern is a biological imperative, equally as neat and messy as the human body.

Containment is another key preoccupation here. Lines are trammelled by edges. Colour is dictated by pattern. Shapes must flow into available space. These works are willingly restrained by the physicality of paper. Small circles punctuate the pieces in a clear allusion to ringbound stationery. And here we catch another chime with the exhibition's title. Those faint blue lines first encountered in primary school stationery, inside the hard-blue cover of one's Pacific-brand exercise book, ruled feint and margin. A reminder of the confinements of childhood, and of learning to write within the lines. Yet Hill's interest is in no way masochistic, rather it unsettles the way we understand restriction. Pattern by its very nature removes choice. It tells us what is coming next: the same as last time. Its seduction is that it offers a release from singularity. In these pieces, pattern begins to suggest a dance between control and loss of control, the possibility of self-abandonment. We are reminded that repetition has a close cousin in frenzy or trance.

And there are generative possibilities here. Embraced restraint might lead to strange and paradoxical empowerment. There's a tingle of this as you step up close to observe the technical restrictions at work. Hill delights in making solid structures responsive, even submissive, to arbitrary pattern. Take the die-cut precision of the juxtaposed furniture pairs of *Back to Back*, *Semi-Supine View*, *Boudoir Studio* and *Feint* (mounted on the back-left wall like a final fillip to our engagement). In their confounding tangle the superimposed shapes at first seem ascendant. But on closer inspection they are dictated by the forms beneath. In the *Pale Fictions* works, hard-line geometric shapes are likewise controlled by their organic watercolour field. As the fine lines of the structure move across the creeping tidewash pattern (reminiscent of Japanese shibori dyeing) they shift in colour, reflecting a darker version of the tone beneath. Beyond the striking aesthetic effect, these works are performances of submission to circumstance. Or a show of submission that culminates in the added hardiness and flexibility of adaptation. They remind us that attention to detail, and responsiveness, provide an evolutionary advantage. Restriction breeds inventiveness.

Lack of external space pushes us into inner rooms, allows us to access negative capability, a subterranean, internal strength.

And in keeping with this, the pieces in *Feint* explore and manoeuvre around another deadline or limit: that of impermanence. Standing side-on to the framed works, which are float mounted to reveal the deckle edge, you can see the very paperiness of the watercolour paper. Pulling out from our examination of their intricate and intimate landscapes we're reminded that they are stubbornly two-dimensional, stubbornly physical. The insistence on materiality reminds me of Emily Dickinson's work. Poems sent in letters rather than published. Poems written on flattened envelopes, the edges of the paper circumscribing the shape and form of the handwriting. Poems framed as conversation or dialogue that have their eye firmly on posterity and immortality. For this flirt with the idea of impermanence is in itself pure performance. A feint or sidestep: we can only fully grasp the meaning of mortality by imagining its opposite, decay. And through this comes the decision to take something into safekeeping, a choice that requires an enactment. If we want to preserve something we fold it in half, we secrete it, we hide it, and by that act it becomes part of us, intimate. Hill's paper works are deeply interested in preservation. Behind their UV-protected glass and in the careful arrangement of their hanging, they ask us simply to perform this with them. The first act of preservation, they suggest, is attention. Come closer, focus, examine, read carefully. In doing so you are implicated, you are responsible. Take imaginative possession—it's by that act that art becomes intimate and the oblique whisper outsounds and outlasts the more strident statement. There is no poignance in this metaphor. Art stowed away inside ourselves finds a more permanent home than any other.

Anna Smaill

The Elegant Detail

A watershed of high modernism, Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, is spun around the Ramsay family and their visits to the Isle of Skye in Scotland between 1910 and 1920. The characters are prone to philosophical introspection, and concerned with loss, subjectivity and the problem of perception, as is to be expected in the aftermath of The Great War. Woolf bestows a recipe for modern watercolour painting on Lily Briscoe, the woman artist character who is there to paint a portrait of Mrs Ramsay: 'Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like colours on a butterfly's wing: but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you would not dislodge with a team of horses.'[1] This could be a description of one of Georgie Hill's works, which are characterised by a see-sawing tension between surface patterning and underlying structure. Revisiting Woolf's period themes—artifice, technology, nature—Hill's meticulous watercolour and graphite works interrogate the history and politics of modernist design with particular attention to the preoccupation with elegant detail. In painting, this has long been discouraged: little things will not make a great one, according to the Royal Academy's Sir Joshua Reynolds, 'The Sublime impresses the mind at once with one great idea; it is a single blow: the Elegant indeed may be produced by repetition; by an accumulation of many minute circumstances.'[2] Detail runs the risk of becoming decoration, and according to the Austrian polemicist Adolf Loos, ornament was crime. Hill's paintings explore oscillations in the conceptual space of detail and decoration, concealing and revealing its gendered history. Her ciphers are the interwoven geometries of modernist seating inscribed with a memory of the body, and the metaphoric value of the medium of watercolour itself.

One detail which has captured Hill's imagination is a connection with New Zealand that is mentioned in Caroline Constant's 2000 biography of Irish modernist (and legendary non-conformist) Eileen Gray. Constant establishes Gray as a sensualist, immersed in the seduction of surfaces and

subjective experience. Her luxurious designs for furniture and interiors —created in a room she described as her 'boudoir-studio'—contrast with the clinical and dehumanising objectivity valourised by male modernists. Gray's predilections drew her to Paris where she settled temporarily in 1902, and she attended summer classes in watercolour painting taught by Frances Hodgkins in Caudebec-en-Caux, about 43 kilometres from Rouen, on the banks of the Seine in Haute-Normandie in northern France. Hodgkins herself had perfected her technique of painting en plein air there in July 1901, working alongside the Penzance-based Norman Garstin, dashing off summary depictions of the romantically traditional town and its quaintly-garbed inhabitants as confections of colour and light.

Hodgkins went on to become the first female teacher at the Academie Colarossi, an art school founded by the Italian sculptor Filippo Colarossi in the Vie arrondissement of Paris in 1910 where Gray also studied. An alternative to the conservative École des Beaux Arts, the Colarossi school not only accepted female students, it allowed them to draw from the nude male model, which many English schools forbade as immoral, ensuring women artists never gained competence in figure painting. An art critic of the time noted 'English schools of painting…do not appear to encourage individuality, and more particularly the individuality of women in art… lady art students of the present day are going to Paris in increasing numbers.'[3] Hodgkins went on to found the School for Watercolour in Paris in 1911, after establishing her reputation by exhibiting her work at the Société international d'aquarellistes from 1909-1910. It suits Hill's purpose to foreground the complexity of the history of watercolour as a medium. In this one detail, the usual hierarchies of centre and periphery, Northern and Southern hemisphere, are reversed and images of the furniture designed by the glamorous and aristocratic European Eileen Gray are conveyed by the vehicle of watercolour painting, as taught to Gray by her antipodean instructor, Hodgkins. Hodgkins achieved what no New Zealand woman artist has been able to do before or since, making her living through teaching and selling watercolour painting in Europe, and being taken seriously as an artist producing work in a medium freighted with a history of women painters and dilettantism.

Watercolour has always been difficult to work with, as Hill has discovered in teaching herself how to use it. Unlike oil painting which can be retouched, errors become indelible once a water-borne pigment is laid on the paper. Despite its unforgiving nature, the 21st century has seen a revival of practice in the medium amongst fine artists. It will never recover the zenith of popularity it achieved in the Victorian period however, when painting in watercolour was a polite accomplishment for every member of the middle class and aristocracy. Its distinct and symbolic history is invoked in Hill's works: a century ago its transparency was associated with the virtue of honesty, compared with the deceptive depths hidden in the opacity of gouache. Valorised was the revelation of underdrawing and the optical mixing afforded by the layering of pigments which created a fresh and fragile effect. Hill steps into the liquid and liminal world of watercolour knowingly, calling its truth into question by working her surfaces into a lapidary style of moth-wing protective colouration which obscures and conceals.

Relishing watercolour's mutable qualities and mood of instability, she conjures Felix Guattari's world of Chaosmosis, where 'objects constitute themselves in a transversal vibratory position, conferring on them a soul, a becoming ancestral, animal, vegetal, cosmic. These objectities-subjectitites are led to work for themselves…they overlap each other, and invade each other to become collective entities, half-thing, half soul, half-man, half beast, machine and flux, matter and sign.'[4] Implicitly, she desublimates that which has been sublimated in the histories of modernism. Emerging from the surface patterning are emblematic representations of the elegant furniture which was designed to decorate sumptuous interiors in the early twentieth century. Her work is both a defence of the history of the elegant detail's past and an illustration of its continuing attraction.

Linda Tyler

1. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, London: Pomona Press, 1927, p.70.
2. Joshua Reynolds, *Discourse IV, Discourses on Painting and the Fine Arts Delivered at The Royal Academy*, London: Edward Lumley, 1850, p.21.
3. Clive Holland, The Studio, December 1903, cited in Gill Perry, 'Training and Professionalism: France', Delia Gaze [ed.]. *Dictionary of Women Artists*, Vol 1, London: Bath Press, 1997, p.92.
4. Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p.102.

Ripolin

Ripolin, the iconic French brand of enamel paint, launched its 2012 range with a series of fairytale-inspired television adverts. In these, the colour red is predictably represented by Red Riding Hood. A young, red-hooded woman in a red dress and red shoes wanders through a heavily stylised dreamscape collecting ruby red apples. The scene cuts to 'reality' where the same woman paints a chair inside her beautifully kept and well-appointed home. Paint, the colour red, and the act of painting have temporarily transported her elsewhere, beyond the everyday.

Another such cut could transpose this scene into one of Georgie Hill's paintings. Similarly situated within the domestic interior, these meticulously made watercolour and graphite paintings also centre around pieces of furniture, as objects that connect the human body with the spaces it inhabits—even if the body itself very rarely appears. Hill's long-term exploration into physical, painterly and psychological space is also often initiated through the use of a pulpy, viscous red. Set on disrupting the pallid effects and expectations of traditional watercolour, this distinctive red serves to throw the work into other formal and thematic realms. Like the Ripolin advert, Hill taps into the symbolic associations the colour carries, especially those connected to the body, the passions, and the feminine. Where the advert plays up or into these associations, Hill's use of red is part of a visual language that confronts these terms, and the cultural histories that construct and impose such meanings on the world.

Hill does not use Ripolin, but Le Corbusier did. He used the paint as substance and also as symbol—of a new modern world, shaped by a new architecture. His manifesto, *The Law of Ripolin*, 'required every citizen to replace his hangings, his damasks, his wall-papers, his stencils, with a plain coat of white Ripolin. His home is made clean'.[1] This was an ideology that sought to cleanse more than walls. Le Corbusier spearheaded an artistic and architectural movement which denied the past, the decorative, ornament, and the realm of the imagination, all in the name of progress and order. Cultural difference was eradicated, traditional gender roles

upheld. There was little space for a figure like architect and furniture designer Eileen Gray, whose resistance to Le Corbusier's dominant theories is registered right throughout her practice. Gray is never far from the surface of Hill's paintings, as both a source of inspiration and as a figure who until recently has largely been white-washed from cultural history. Perhaps Le Corbusier used Ripolin when he effectively vandalised Gray's E1027 house by painting bawdy murals throughout its interior spaces. It is perhaps no wonder that Ripilon has rebranded, even if its new campaign continues to position the female experience within the white walled domestic environment, a space where women are left to decorate and fantasise.

Feint, Hill's new body of work, takes on these various legacies of modernism. Subverting Le Corbusier's assertion that painting and decoration must always be subject to architecture, here the deep architectural spaces of Hill's earlier work disappear under swathes of pattern and movement that pulse across and shatter the unity of the picture plane. This patterning has always been present, but was previously contained within or pushed against a linear architectural scheme; one that almost impossibly turned watercolour painting into something resembling or giving a pulse to architectural or computer-generated CAD drawings.

The metonymic patterning that now infects the supreme whiteness of Hill's picture plane, the paper she works on, and the modernist wall it symbolises, has its origins in forms of protective colouration deployed in nature. Hill brings these strategies for survival and attack into the domestic, artistic and cultural realms. Here representation hovers right at its limits: spaces morph, expand and collapse in front of one's eyes, objects seem to emerge, dissolve and return within the space of a few seconds. Hill's camouflage-based patterning is a form of visual deception that turns the potentially passive act of viewing into an active process of pattern and object recognition. The intense patterning induces the loss of control and focus that modernism actively opposed, 'the confusion of the eye' that Le Corbusier associated with the decorative arts, and with the experience of 'The Orient'.[2]

Hill's new emphasis on surface trickery and deception also aligns with the strategies of Gray, whose architecture and furniture design are similarly set on disrupting the unity of modernist form from within. Like Hill's abstractions, Gray's architecture refuses to reveal itself all at once, denying the modernist emphasis on clarity of form and the sense of control offered by the complete view. Gray constantly interrupts and intervenes within architectural space, setting up visual ambiguities which insist on the value of subjective rather than objective experience. Driven by similar concerns, Hill has shifted attention to how her paintings work in or on, rather than depict, architectural space. Like Gray's architecture, this is a form of painting located within the experiences and sensations of the physical world, rather than an attempt to repel these forces.

Many of the devices used in Hill's new paintings find some parallel in Gray's architecture. Both work to establish multiple points of tension, breaking the coherence of the surface under a series of fractures, folds and seams. Forms constantly touch, merge or overlap, adding movement and vitality to the architectural or pictorial surface. Hill's paintings have a collage-like effect, where individual pieces seem to have broken off and floated across the picture plane before settling in new positions next to or on top of other forms. These pieces often carry the delicate blues, pinks and feathery textures familiar from Hill's earlier work as a sign of the outside world imposing itself within the architectural interior. Here these elements seem to be less in battle than working together to disrupt pictorial space. Gray's distinctive use of the strip window works in similar ways. Rather than using these windows to provide a coherent and contained view of the landscape framed within the architecture, Gray sets them off centre to establish ambiguous and dynamic plays between inside and outside worlds, providing viewpoints that are constantly shifting, partial and contingent. Hill and Gray both create forms that feel that they could be folded in on each other, or, alternatively, opened out endlessly.

Gray's presence in these paintings is most tangible in the pieces of furniture hovering within the patterned surfaces. In *Back to Back*, her single-armed 'Non-Conformist Chair' becomes one with another—a chair designed by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, an Art Deco master reviled by

Le Corbusier for his adherence to traditional forms of ornamental decoration. In *Semi-Supine View*, Gray's 'Transat Chair' encounters the 'LC4 Chaise Lounge' better known as 'the machine for rest', designed by Le Corbusier in collaboration with Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret. Set in Hill's patterned world these objects mix and interbreed, their closely guarded borders and relative levels of utility and decoration breaking down. Hill's paintings are constantly drawn from such an entanglement of objects, forms and styles, with Gray as the activating presence. Too modernist for art deco, too sensually decadent for modernism, Gray's work occupies an indeterminate and often invisible space between the two—a space embodied in the perceptual uncertainties and optical dislocations of Hill's paintings. It's this indeterminate space that matters—it's here that difference and resistance can be asserted.

While in many ways Hill's paintings are set in the past, her concerns are very much of the present. Her work sits within a strand of contemporary practice which challenges or extends the precepts of modernism through reinvigorating the pattern and decoration it outlawed as decadent or irrelevant. Locally, her work connects with the drawn or taped mark-making of Ruth Thomas-Edmond—where repeated, dense patterns accumulate and move across the page or the wall—or the precise, equation-driven abstraction of Martin Thompson. All three artists work on paper and with a hand-based system of making and construction that blurs the processes of drawing or painting with that of collage or other forms that have traditionally fallen into the category of craft. These three artists are part of a wider cultural return to the decorative which accompanies broader technological developments. It is led in part by the omnipresence of flash-based technologies which have turned the computer screen into a space for the regular encounter with moving form and imagery[3]—a contemporary presence that also seems to haunt the surfaces of Hill's paintings.

Yet, ultimately Hill remains a painter, and all of these concerns are worked out through her medium of watercolour. With its historical allegiance to nature, colour, the Sunday painter, and the deft and delicate movements of the hand, watercolour is bound up with that collection of objects,

forms and practices that have been coded as feminine or decorative and cast within or alongside the domestic interior. Hill's historically engaged, rigorously controlled and labour-intensive process works both with and against the properties and associations of her medium. Where Gray sought a 'non-heroic' form of modernist architecture[4], Hill works to quietly 'heroicise' watercolour. But she does so only to question and undermine these very terms, to create layers of visual and conceptual ambiguity, celebrate Gray, and offer a thoroughly contemporary take on watercolour painting by making the medium almost disappear or become camouflaged within itself.

Aaron Lister

1. Le Corbusier, *A Coat of Whitewash, The Law of Ripolin*, 1925, L'Esprit Nouveau Articles, Oxford: Architectural Press, 1998.
2. Le Corbusier, 'Journey to the East', quoted in David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p.73.
3. Alice Twemlow, 'The decriminalization of ornament', *Eye Magazine*, No.58, Vol.15, Winter 2005.
4. Caroline Constant, 'E.1027: The Nonheroic Modernism of Eileen Gray', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol.53, No.3, 1994.

Boudoir/Studio (Eileen Gray Stool with Ruhlmann Vanity Seat)

2013

watercolour and graphite on paper, 415 x 320mm

Back to Back (Eileen Gray Non Conformist Chair
with Ruhlmann Defenses Chair)

2013
watercolour and graphite on paper, 397 x 330mm

Semi-Supine View (Eileen Gray Transat Chair with Chaise Longue by Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret—'The Machine for Resting')

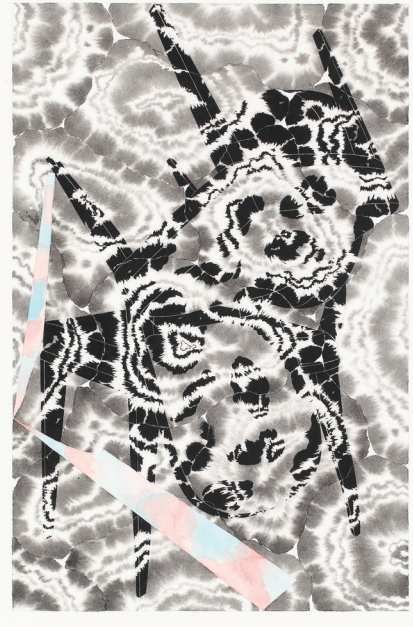
2013
watercolour and graphite on paper, 452 x 385mm

Pale Fictions (Viewpoint #1)

2013
watercolour and graphite on paper, 452 x 385mm

Pale Fictions (Viewpoint #2)

2013
watercolour and graphite on paper, 452 x 385mm



Feint (Two Ruhlmann Chairs)

2013
watercolour and graphite on paper, 380 x 280mm

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Georgie Hill (b.1979) is based in Auckland. She received a BFA from Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland in 2001. Recent solo exhibitions include *Pale fictions*, 2013, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, *Chromesthesia*, 2012, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington and *L-shaped counter*, 2009, The Physics Room, Christchurch. Her work has been in exhibitions including *Breathing Space*, 2012, and *Cloud 9 - New directions in contemporary painting*, 2009, both at Christchurch Art Gallery. She is represented by Ivan Anthony Gallery in Auckland.

Anna Smaill is a Wellington-based poet and academic. Her first novel, *The Chimes*, will be published by Sceptre, UK in 2015.

Linda Tyler is the Director of the Centre for Art Studies at The University of Auckland, which administers the art collection, Gus Fisher Gallery and Window.

Aaron Lister is a curator at City Gallery Wellington.

City Gallery Wellington
Te Whare Toi