



Working from home

Cathie Pilkington weaves together private and public lives in her surreal and immersive exhibition inside Pallant House Gallery

words *alice snape*
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As you walk into one of the rooms in Cathie Pilkington's 'Working from Home' exhibition, set inside the historic rooms of Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, you find yourself confronted by a young girl staring back at you from a mirror.

Portrait of Cathie Pilkington with her work by Eamonn McCabe



For a moment, you feel as if you're walking in on a moment you shouldn't. An interloper, snooping in. And it's confronting because Cathie believes that the purpose of art is to deal with "big subjects." "In this sculpture *Curio*, I used naturalistic representation to talk about subject and object – who am I in all of this? And general existential anxiety," explains Cathie. "At the stage in my life when I made it, I didn't think about the 'female voice', I felt androgynous and

independent and was happy to mediate big ideas through the slightly distanced and intentionally playful representations of children – thus avoiding all the political and formal difficulties of representing adult bodies. But a few years after my daughter was born, I did an exhibition at the Museum of Childhood in London – it was at this show, with a group of small figures called 'Lady Dolls' that I began to tackle the question of how to approach a female figure with relevance, ambivalence →

Curio, 2003/15
Oil paint on
jesmonite, ceramics,
1920s mirror dresser
Courtesy of the
Artist

Artwork above:
Glyn Philpot,
*Portrait of Mrs.
Clement Cross, the
Artist's Sister*, 1934



Back and front view: *Pieta 1: Playing Dead*, 2018
Oil paint on jesmonite, fabric, wood, steel
Private Collection



Below left: *Degas Doll 1*, 2017
Below right: *Twinkle*, 2014



"It is as if the rooms are inhabited. There is a feeling of trespass when you enter"

and formal invention," Cathie continues. "Most of the figurative work in 'Working From Home' developed from this point." And this is what I love about her work: it's strange, challenging and surreal, and confronts themes such as motherhood, privacy, domesticity and the unconscious.

What is also really striking about Pilkington's sculptures is that they sit

alongside and interact with the gallery's collection of artworks – rather than standing alone, like many solo exhibitions. Some of these include works by the likes of Eileen Agar, Edgar Degas, Paula Rego, Victor Willing, as well as a series of Lord Snowdon's photographs of women artists. I particularly loved a portrait of Barbara Hepworth on the beach wearing a red →

Good-Bed-Bad-Bed, 2018
Painted and quilted linen, jesmonite, plaster, wood, velvet, clay, and oil paint
Courtesy of the Artist



Surrogate, 2007
Plaster, wire, wool,
wood, fur, clay, felt,
bike parts
and paint
David Roberts
Collection, London

head scarf, which is mirrored by Cathie's *The Bride*, a nude female form draped with a red scarf. Her work is placed thoughtfully to interact alongside others.

"The installations I build frequently merge different kinds of spaces and references – in this case storage and display, private and public, emotional and intellectual are intentionally jumbled together," explains Cathie. "This could be described as a distinctly female 'entangled' language."

The exhibition is "immersive", which means no labels appear on the works. "It is as if the rooms are inhabited. There is a feeling of trespass when you enter," says Cathie. And this is exactly how it feels when you wander around the rooms. "I wanted the viewer to experience each room as a whole dialogue, not a series of works – I hope this gives room for the visual, emotional and psychological content to do its work before we read something that tells us what to think."



"It's about making, sculpture, history, being a woman, an artist, a mother and a person"

Three Graces, 2015
Clay, fabric, wood
and paint
Courtesy of
the Artist

Cathie stresses that her work is not autobiographical. "It is not confessional – it's about making, sculpture, history, being a woman, an artist, a mother and a person. Making art is never a flight of fancy," she assures me. "Sure, it's emotional and intuitive on some levels but making sculpture is a hard-won battle. It's physical and critical. Before you even get to the 'image' you have to build an armature

that will stand up. The way my figures are pieced together combining soft and hard parts, low and high cultural references and collaged technical production bears out this questioning. I am trying to develop a visual language, which can mediate the complexities of our lives." ♦

Working from Home is on until 31 March 2019, at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester