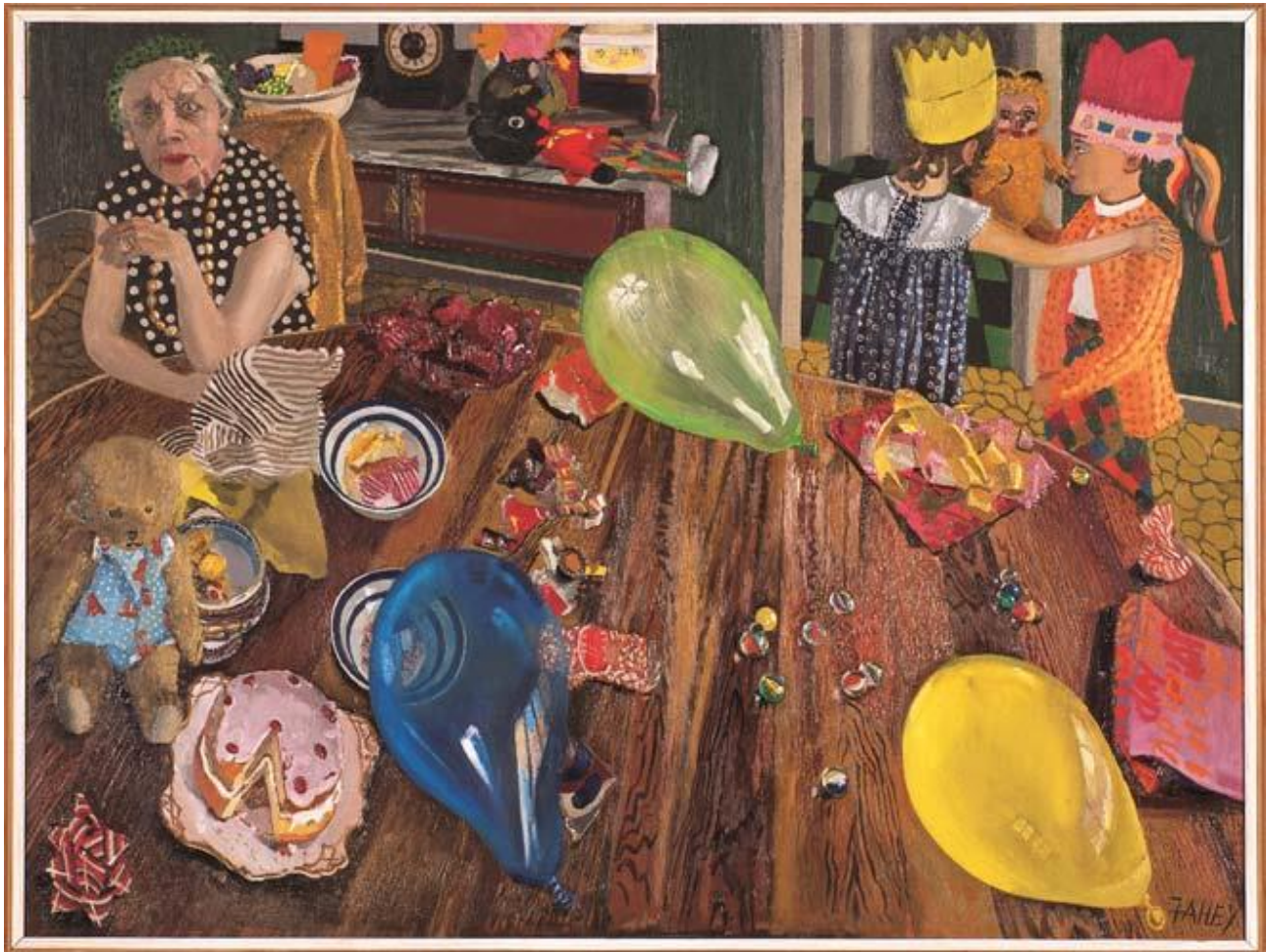


Ways of looking; ways of seeing

Jacqueline Fahey, *The birthday party*, 1974



For the past three years, this woman has caught my eye. She gives me a knowing look as I enter the Cotton building. It's the kind of look that makes me conscious of myself looking. She sees me; I see myself, plodding along the corridor, just having struggled up the hill through fair weather or foul. For me the Cotton building is a transitional space; I'm always on my way somewhere else. It's not the sort of moment one often captures to examine. The woman who inspires this self-reflection is herself caught in a quiet moment, a kind of afterwards moment. She looks out from the corner of Jacqueline Fahey's 1974 painting, *The birthday party* - an older woman, presumably the grandmother of the girls in the frame, she sits alone at a table strewn with the remains of the day's festivities. Fahey challenges preconceptions of what is worthy of our attention. She allows us to see new things because she gives us a new way of looking.

In the '70s Fahey's way of looking did indeed present a challenge. Figurative painting was not in fashion, and the small dramas of everyday domestic life not considered a subject for paint. Instead of accepting the idea that worthy subjects lay in the elsewhere represented by grand landscapes or the abstract, Fahey determined to draw inspiration from what was around her. "I would embrace domesticity", she writes, "transform it, interpret it."¹ *The birthday party* does not show the excitement of the blowing out of candles, the cutting of the cake, or the unwrapping of presents. Rather, it depicts the bit that happens after, when you have come to the end of the script, but find yourself still on stage. The girls are absorbed in their own world and wandering out of frame, the mother is presumably busy somewhere else. Only the messy table and the grandmother remain. Without knowing anything of Fahey's life, politics or work, I felt drawn to *The birthday party* because it is a moment and an emotion I recognise, and one not usually depicted.

Life is not always poised for the camera, but full of messy uninspired bits as well. Fahey describes how she made a conscious decision to include the "routine stuff" that made up her day, the "children's drink bottles, toys, lunchboxes, kittens and dead birds."² In *The birthday party* she shows us the discarded objects on the table as things of significance and beauty. And indeed they are beautiful; the blue balloon, particularly alluring in its transparency. The discarded wrapping-paper delicately patterned. The table-top with its swirled wood grain has its own appeal. The painting is rich in patterns, colours and textures that reward a longer closer look. Fahey rehabilitates the everyday, validating the domestic experience as worthy of our attention and reflection.

I enjoy these '70s paintings because they are so immediate, what they present so recognisable. But Fahey is ambivalent. She felt these paintings had trapped her "in the '70s women's movement box."³ The label 'domestic painter' applied to dismiss and constrain. Reflecting on her time teaching at Elam Fahey notes with some irony that colleague Dick Frizzell was adept at taking objects of the everyday and presenting them as something marvellous. "There he is in the supermarket, in the bathroom cupboard, transforming that stuff in a magic moment of looking....Because he was a guy

1 Jacqueline Fahey, *Before I Forget* (Auckland: Auckland University Press), 37.

2 Fahey, *Before I Forget*, 31.

3 Fahey, *Before I Forget*, 73.

it was not called domestic painting.”⁴ Later Fahey would take her way of looking outside to the streets, but it would remain a personal view, a conversation. Wider issues would be illuminated through the lens of personal response, often with herself or family members as characters in the drama.

Fahey often depicts herself, and her family in her work. The woman and girls in *The birthday party* could be her mother and daughters. But the painting works for me, because it validates my experience too. The woman could just as easily be my grandmother, and the girls myself and my cousin. While familiar, it also gives me a new perspective on this scene from my imagined past. As viewer of this painting we are given a privileged position, able to picture ourselves as both the girls and the grandmother. I have only a nine-year-old's view of my grandmother. As an adult I have been fascinated and frustrated in my attempts to know her life. What you see depends on where you are looking from, and as a child she was only grandmother, and as hidden to me as the grandmother of the girls in the painting. I am able now to have a different view of her, but only in my imagination.

Painting is not a direct reflection of the world, but a construction of it; a place where discarded wrapping paper is beautiful, and where the imagination takes form. A painting is also what we put of ourselves into it. While Fahey takes events from her life, and does not tidy the table first, she also exercises a high degree of critical reflection and creativity. Painting, like other forms of storytelling, is a way of making sense of the world. It is no casual gesture that she begins the first volume of her memoirs with an account of her grand-parents and great-grand-parents. Or to be more precise, the family stories about these people. What is told, and retold. The stories gain weight in the imagination, phrases and images taking on layers of meaning. The stories we tell about ourselves become part of who we are. Imagination is the bridge between past and present, as well as a path to potential futures.

In *Don't Ask*, 2008, Fahey speaks directly to her past self, but there is such a gap of time and perspective that they cannot understand one another. Though not as directly articulated as in later

4 Fahey, *Before I Forget*, 146.

paintings, such as *Don't Ask*, I feel that *The birthday party* also communes between past and present, speaking across generations. The results are similarly disconnected. The grandmother and the girls are not even aware of each other in this moment. But Fahey gives the viewer the opportunity to stretch a hand to each. Is it possible to change our point of view and to communicate more successfully? Can painting change the world? Can it give us a new way of thinking by giving us a new way of looking, not only between generations but within society as a whole? Throughout her memoirs, Fahey talks of learning “to see what I saw, not what I had been taught to see”.⁵ When what we are taught to see is constructed from a single point of view, the importance of other voices, other ways of seeing the world, cannot be underestimated. Fahey challenges a view of reality that is white, well-off and male. She validates the experiences of women and the everyday of family life. To see your experience represented is powerful, as is being able to show your view to others. Maybe they won't understand, but perhaps they can begin to try to see. Less certain than she was in the '70s, of painting's ability to have this transformative impact, Fahey addresses this question directly in her 2003 work *Can Painting Change Anything?* Walking on down the Cotton building corridor I now see a little bit more because Fahey has shared her vision with me, and I would like to argue that it can.

Fahey, Jacqueline. *For the Birds*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006.

———. *Before I Forget*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2012.

⁵ Fahey, *Before I Forget*, 46.