



Final Domestic Exposé - I Paint Myself, 1981–82. Oil and collage on board, 909 x 1830 mm.
COLLECTION OF AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TOI O TĀMAKI

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Jacqueline Fahey

Chez Jacqueline Fahey is a Grey Lynn bungalow. After walking past palmy luxuriance that could pass as a tropical setting for her 1998 novel, *Cutting Loose*, I'm soon in her front room, the wonders and delights of which would rival those of a Victorian parlour. There are additions since my last visit – beyond a 1920s screen is a vast mirror, its faux-baroque frame livened with cerulean blue from Fahey's brush. Significantly, it echoes the hue of the plastic flowers threaded through the chandelier.

A full-scale assertive canvas of her son-in-law Geoffrey almost threatens the intimacy of the room. And painterly impulses can't be contained within frames. There are two patches of wall in which murals try to take over, a little like the greenery outside. One, I'm told, is 'a bit of fun, a bit of wallpaper'; the other, with its chains of roses, has political intent. An inscription is woven among them: 'In the days of the penal laws you could not say her name – Ireland – in song & poetry'.

I had not caught up with Jacqueline since late 2005, when she launched Joanne Drayton's book on Frances Hodgkins. It was some night. While the publisher introduced and extolled, Fahey stood to the side, with the same inscrutable smile that Studio La Gonda caught in the cover shot that we used for *Art New Zealand* 81. Her thoughts on the older painter revealed as much about the speaker as their subject. In my mind I could see links between Felix Man's 1945 photographs of Hodgkins at her easel and footage of Fahey working in her studio for the 1985 television documentary, *Final Domestic Exposé*.

This 20-minute gem, produced by Jillian Ewart as part of the series *Art From Under*, is a programme the likes of which we don't see these days. After a toast and tea breakfast with her late husband, Fraser McDonald, Fahey talks art with interviewer Katherine Findlay. Seriously. It's veritable manna for the soul and mind after the production-heavy, content-light, dazzle-byte arts programmes we're meted out today.



Can Painting Change Anything?, 2003. Oil on canvas, 530 x 915 mm.
PRIVATE COLLECTION, AUCKLAND

So there was Jacqueline, 20 years ago, weighing up the virtues of technique and feeling; she was now looking for certainty and simplicity and leafing through some drawings from the early 1960s, admiring their vigour, strength and concentration.

There's a memorable sequence in which Findlay draws out Fahey on the reception that was given, in 1981, to the painting that lent the programme its title: *Final Domestic Exposé – I Paint Myself*. And paint herself she did. Boldly, nude and with forthright brushstrokes that make you sense muscle under skin. 'Every stroke a thought', as she would remember Cecil Kelly telling her back in her Christchurch days. Fahey, centre-canvas as the woman trapped in domestic chaos, has relinquished her brush to take up her lipstick, but the brush is central to so much of her art-making. In the 1950s it was often Warrior Fahey who was waiting to do battle, brush in one hand and palette shield in the other. In 2003, in *Can Painting Change Anything?*, the brush is more equivocal. Is it a weapon or simply a gesture of defiance? Giving the brush or giving the finger?

The same brush is waved with flamboyant nonchalance in the 1986 painting *Departure* and it's a lecture-room accessory in 1990's *Me Teaching*, with the artist in front of a text on Clytaemnestra, written in Jacqueline's characteristic script. The appearance of Greek legends in Melanesia fits well with the cultural mix that would have the diarist Bernadette in *Cutting Loose* reeling in images from Queen Theodora to Akhmatova while mixing cocktails in a troubled Pacific paradise.

Now, in 2006, Jacqueline greets me brush in hand, in the throes of exploring a new canvas. We talk about the sheer physicality of the painting process and the survival of a perhaps threatened art form.

'What interests me is what oil paint can do best. Using your material, the stuff you're working with, is very much part of that paint language which is getting lost. A lot of art today could be done much better with photos, acrylic or prints. There's no need to use oil paint and go through the trauma of the dirt and the smell.

'I look on painting like playing chess,' she tells me, 'I like the satisfaction of sitting and looking at it, catching it off-guard while I have a drink at night and think "that's it". I couldn't do the sketch and then blow it up because if I start with an idea, that idea is totally transformed through the process, and out of it comes another painting altogether. But the painting I thought I was going to do was a good kick-off point.'

Kick-off point – a nice turn of phrase this, in an age where some artists might moderate their language for the theoretically inclined.

Back in the 1970s, a friend of mine, much given to extravagant similes,

would always welcome the sight of a city glittering at night; for him, it was as if an empress of yore had cast her diamonds on an expanse of black velvet. Jacqueline Fahey's paintings have the same flourish to them when it comes to letting objects roll, spill and fly across their space.

Final Domestic Exposé is particularly rich. In the foreground are body fuels, from cigarettes to fruit, collaged as was Fahey's wont in that period. Gin is ever-present. (In 1977 it may have been Seagram's, four years later it was Gilmours. Today, I'm told, the favoured juniper juice is Bombay.) On the left-hand side, the significant and signifying clothes recall those in the domestic paintings of the 1960s. I've always wondered just what mayhem she may have brought about if she had been painting in Holland in the eighteenth century. It's all a tangle here of scarves, necklaces and weightier wear. By implication they all have stories to tell in the narrative of the canvas. Perhaps the filched garment from 1979's *My Skirt's in Your Fucking Room* is somewhere, concealed in the pile?

There's more doomed domesticity in 1986's *Happy Xmas* with Fahey caught between food preparation and dishwashing – with a bottle of washing liquid as her surrogate brush. Behind her is chaos. Cats roll around watched by a bemused rat. A daughter dances in the background, or is it that simple? Perhaps she has been caught in the blast of the malevolent fridge disgorging its contents into the room?

If a single Jacqueline Fahey painting requires considered scrutiny, then, ten years ago, her survey show *Portrait in a Looking Glass* required multiple visits simply to take in all that was being offered. At Pakuranga's Fisher Gallery there was simply not enough wall space for her expressionist tableaux.

There's a marvellous rough-and-ready interview with the painter published in the slim *Portrait* catalogue – a rare chance to hear an artist speak instead of artspeak. Fahey describes an early 1960s Ban the Bomb committee she belonged to as a mix of 'Mao-style gangster manner with utopian visions'. When her early Canterbury studies come up, she talks of an institution 'drenched in gentility'. After the interviewer waxes staunchly on the deep significance of the painting *Fraser Analyses My Words*, Fahey comes right to the point: 'The painting is about the effect of booze too. The cloudy effects of drinking together.'

Eight years on, I would recall the overwhelming experience of *Portrait in a Looking Glass* when I was exposed to the embarrassment of riches in

OPPOSITE: *My Skirt's in Your Fucking Room!* 1979. Oil on canvas, 1200 x 980 mm.
PRIVATE COLLECTION, AUCKLAND



Fahey's most recent show, *Bringing It Home*: eight large oils housed in the shoebox-like space of Anna Miles Gallery.

'It's Victorian,' Jacqueline exclaims, commenting on the way that frame jostled frame, 'but it's the best part of Victorian. I hate curated shows, those ones where they do good taste on them. Just crowd 'em in!'

It was just the tactic needed.

The subject of *Bringing It Home* was confrontation. While Fahey's paintings of the 1950s, '60s and '70s explored aspects of confrontation on the domestic front, in the last decade the painter has been venturing beyond. The late 1990s saw the K Road paintings, inspired by her personal mix of socialism and feminism – a subject that she was already exploring when the 1985 documentary was filmed. In 2002 she took herself to the local Grey Lynn Park, fascinated by the skateboarding and skateboarders, reflecting their scoops and swoops in the layouts of the canvases, totally caught up in what she now sees as 'the theatre of the place'. Within a year, life had taken a darker turn. Crazy Liberian militiamen were now storming along Williamson Avenue, wielding their machine guns, while local sybarites were gliding into Leighton Street in their convertibles. It's that local, and universal with it.

In the gallery, the paintings were very much a sequence. Characters recurred from one canvas to another; different images offered the same event from a different point of view, a different moment in time, *Rashomon*-like. Yes, Virginia, terrorism and violence can happen within cooee of the local dairy.

The detail with which Fahey examines the interactions of the Williamson Avenue characters is typical of the artist. Her attention to and cataloguing of the minutiae of life was always what gave her domestic visions their grunt; and now the issues have expanded.

Just one of these paintings remains in Fahey's front room but, en route for her studio, my eyes are caught by an even larger work which takes us back to the domestic and personal. It's a portrait of her mother, Margaret. The same Margaret Fahey who exudes such a presence in the 1985 documentary, tutoring granddaughter Emily in a piano piece; the slightly sinister 'Mother' in 1977's *Mother and Daughter Quarrelling*, literally torn apart by the argument.

This hallway canvas, *The Epiphany of Margaret Fahey*, 'started as a portrait of Mum,' Jacqueline tells me, 'but went deeper into the conflict that I had at the time.' She admires its energy, the way in which she picked up on her mother's musical loves and made it 'like a Baroque Italian thing'. We stand back and, with a magisterial sweep of the hand, she sums it up: 'It's like a Nor'wester is blowing through the image . . . but that's life.'

As far as lives go, Fahey has had a more colourful one than many, and much of it is there in her new autobiography, *Something for the Birds*, recently published by Auckland University Press. The Cavafy quote which heads the book ('Out of talk, appearance and manner I'll make an excellent suit of armour; and in this way I'll face malicious people without the slightest fear or weakness') might well apply to her own *modus operandi* on canvas and in life.

'It's an incredible concept put plainly,' Fahey tells me, 'and really modern in the way that you hope modern would be . . . but it isn't.' In a flash we zoom from the Greece of Cavafy to the Timaru of Fahey's girlhood. 'Don't pretend, as Great Aunt Mary Ellen said, pretend's . . . nothing.'

The autobiography strides from her great-grandfather Michael Gerity 'riding like a Cossack' to the pleasure she gets from the birds in her Grey Lynn garden. Socialism and art, politics and family run through these pages, thoughts and personalities divulged with passion and thoroughness. Early on in the book, after Michael's final, tragic Cossack ride, Fahey admits that she likes the multiple implications of this first event. 'This sort of storytelling always makes connections,' she writes, 'it leads us on, or takes us sideways or even backwards. It follows the creative directions that are produced by the first story.'

It's the same with Jacqueline Fahey's paintings, as she explores, veering in every which direction until she connects. She's quick to assert that 'after a certain point you have to give up your intellect and thinking and go with the eyes.' Painting, for Jacqueline Fahey, is the ultimate connection and resolution. In her own words, it's all a matter of 'finding out what's going on there.'