

GALERIE FONS WELTERS

Juliette Blightman

Aaaahhh!

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On light and darkness – Juliette Blightman in conversation with Eva Burgering

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EB: I first encountered your work, *A Room of One's Own*, a sculptural piece consisting of a trampoline, as part of the exhibition *The Botanical Revolution* in the Centraal Museum Utrecht in 2021.

JB: This work became integral to my PhD research which was based around Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and how it might be read almost a hundred years later. The trampoline piece was titled *A Room of One's Own* and ended up becoming a metaphor for this strange prison like cell that kids play in. My daughter treated the trampoline as a room, and it became an extension of our home. This room morphed and changed shape so many times throughout the seasons, which is why it was also important that the specific trampoline from our garden was shown in the exhibitions.

EB: Indeed, I like this idea of the trampoline as a shape-shifting object, changing throughout the seasons. In the summer, it takes the shape of a nice, playful object, and in winter, it suddenly becomes this sad object that is perishing in the garden.

JB: Definitely. At the same time, they are these monstrous, ugly things, right? It represents a lot of what I was writing about: the domestic and how that might morph and seep into artworks, but also 'juxtaposition' and the integrity of the images it places and how it can work against the fragmentation of disparate elements and personal circumstances, allowing audiences to forge their own connections. I feel this becomes more and more relevant, especially in the UK—and I'm sure in the Netherlands too—where the cost of living and the costs of having separate studios are just becoming more and more unaffordable. The idea that you can have a room of your own is now a privilege, rather than a necessity to an artist, and that any shared space will incorporate many different relationships, seasons and people.

EB: Besides the idea of privacy versus the public or the communal, the domestic or the idea of the home for me also has strong roots in the gendered division of spaces. Can you tell me a bit more about how this is reflected in your practice as an artist and the PhD you just finished?

JB: I originally drew a lot from the second-wave feminist movement, especially artists like Judy Chicago or Miriam Shapiro. I think there is still so much stigma around the domestic or taking that space seriously, like the Sunday painter or the hobbyist that works within the home. I was looking at artists like Frances Stark and Andy Warhol, people who really embed the home within their work. This method of juxtaposing the personal and professional life became really important throughout the PhD. I started working with the

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idea that elements that might at first seem disparate do have a relationship with each other, either in contrast or in alignment with each other. This became a very interesting

topic for me throughout my research; I studied different artists and the way they worked. I also looked at those that tried to separate the domestic from the professional, which was a lot of the time unsuccessful.

EB: Is that also why you are so non-hierarchical in picking your subjects? Elevating the domestic, daily life objects such as a fishbowl or trampoline to the same level as, say, a portrait of your daughter?

JB: Yes. There's also a strong relationship between the nonhierarchical and counterpoints in music. I never quite explain it properly, not being a musician, but this is a compositional technique in which every element is as important as the other one. There's no hierarchy to the bass, percussion, or the vocal aspect. I'm always striving for this within my own work and exhibitions, that even if there is a sound piece, it is as important as the painting, the sculpture, and the photograph. I see it also connected to the idea of value, and maybe in terms of a feminist narrative, that there is no value of one thing over another. Everything is as valuable as each other in that sense. I try not to follow a predetermined path and try to remain free in my decisions. This idea of unpredictability is also what drew me to fireworks and the works in the show *Aaahhh!!!* at Galerie Fons Welters. To me, fireworks represent a lot of that freedom and the inability to predict what they might do. Although they might or will explode at some point, each one is unique, and each one is different.

EB: I think it's also fascinating that, in contrast to the fish tank or the toilets or the windows, fireworks cannot necessarily be found within the house. For me, fireworks are in the first place opposites of your domestic, repetitive objects and represent the festive, the special, the mysterious.

JB: Yes, and they are also expensive. They can terrify people, they are violent, explosive, loud. However, there is also this beautiful miscommunication between the light of the firework and the sound of the firework, that often comes after, especially when watching them from afar, the sound follows like thunder because of the way light travels faster. The light—which can be seen as beautiful—is accompanied by this darkness and undercurrent of noise, and this moment, of when the light interrupts the darkness, quickly returns to darkness again.

EB: Of course, there is then also the aspect of looking outward from inside, looking out the window to the fireworks or seeing the reflection of fireworks in windows. How do you see this juxtaposition between the interior and the exterior?

JB: It's a motif that I constantly return to. More than anything, I think the window, for me, represents the idea of being inside looking out because it is the most perfect idea of moving through something, isn't it? Like performing innocently. And to return to the idea of beauty and darkness, I think that's why I love the method of juxtaposition because you can always interplay. Even if you're comfortable sitting in your home, you might be

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looking on the internet reading horrific stories about what's happening in the outside world. We're so displaced on a day-to-day level— there's always a darker undertone that is present somehow these days. A lot of the earlier installations I made back in 2008, 2009, especially the piece at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London with the fishbowl, were very much steeped in time. I was very much focused on the idea of time within a work and how you can almost manipulate time, how time moves in an exhibition.

Now looking back over the last 15 years, it's very obvious to me that I would eventually move into painting because within that medium, there's this element of time and layering that passes through while you're translating something in your head or an image onto the canvas. It feels like the paintings now start performing some of the earlier, more sculptural work, for instance, the fishes in the bowl or the view out of the window.

EB: Do you see the exhibition space as an extension of your work as well?

JB: That's a good question. I think it's interesting because I work in this sequential way that each exhibition leads into the next one. With each exhibition, I think a lot about what remains. It's very hard to respond immediately to a moment we live through, which is why I think documentation of exhibitions is also interesting. Similar to when you're asked to comment on something that is happening right now that you don't have enough perspective on or enough time to understand the bigger picture of something, for me it's the same with the exhibitions. I think of them as stories or acts, each leading into the next one. They continue, although they morph and change, and the works change. There is definitely a continuation. I often work best when I'm working on a few exhibitions at the same time. In terms of an everyday studio practice, it's actually quite hard just to work away in the studio all the time without having a sense of where these works are going to go or what time of year they will be shown. I'm always trying to make a painting that continues to move and how to get light to move through the painting, which will often change depending on the architecture and light of the space. To return briefly to the usage of the fireworks: with a firework, you know it's going to move and disappear and change, but in the photographs, there is this momentary idea of all of that time. Everything is going on, and you are just waiting for it to fade out. It's not so much about a static moment. And those moments shift so much all the time.

EB: How do you then balance between spontaneity and planning in your work?

JB: In terms of exhibition making, there's always spontaneity. There's always a surprise or always something that maybe doesn't quite work as planned. But even when I have a clear plan of how I want the show to be, I always bring many, many other things with me to allow that process to remain live. I worked for a long time as an invigilator in a gallery, and I realized then that actually most things are all down to the amount of time you spend in them and with them. You form a relationship with almost anything if you give it time and spend time with it, in it, alongside it. And I think that's when you also start noticing the chipped paint on the wall or the scuff on the skirting board, or the equivalent with people, the scar above their eye or the mole on their neck. I guess this relates back to being very much influenced by Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and the dwelling in a room.

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That's what makes something feel more familiar and therefore, other ideas come into being. I also think that this is one of the hardest things of surviving as an artist. Sadie Benning I think said this: as an artist, you have to keep a channel open to let things come in. And it can happen in the moments where many, many things are going on. We're so up against the current information time with mobile phones and social media. Doing nothing and then refusing to do nothing in that way has become hard, because in those moments, you immediately reach for your phone. This is why I also like the idea of freezing time: the images of the fireworks also suspend us. I think that's where photography as a medium is also really crucial because there's nothing else that can quite suspend moments like photography. With some of the firework photographs that

I'm showing, it is the light fading out or the non-event. Because we're so overwhelmed with images that the nothingness becomes louder.

Juliette Blightman's (1980, UK) solo and duo presentations include: Lafayette Anticipations (FR, 2023); Vleeshal (NL, 2021), Kölnischer Kunstverein (DE, 2020), Western Front, Vancouver (CA, 2018), Kunsthalle Bern (CH, 2016), South London Gallery (UK, 2016), Badischer Kunstverein (DE, 2015). Blightman's work is part of the collection of Museum Ludwig, Cologne (DE) and Arts Council England collections.

Eva Burgering is curator, exhibition maker and writer. She is head of production and publications at RADIUS, Delft and works as freelance curator for contemporary art spaces such as Nest in The Hague.