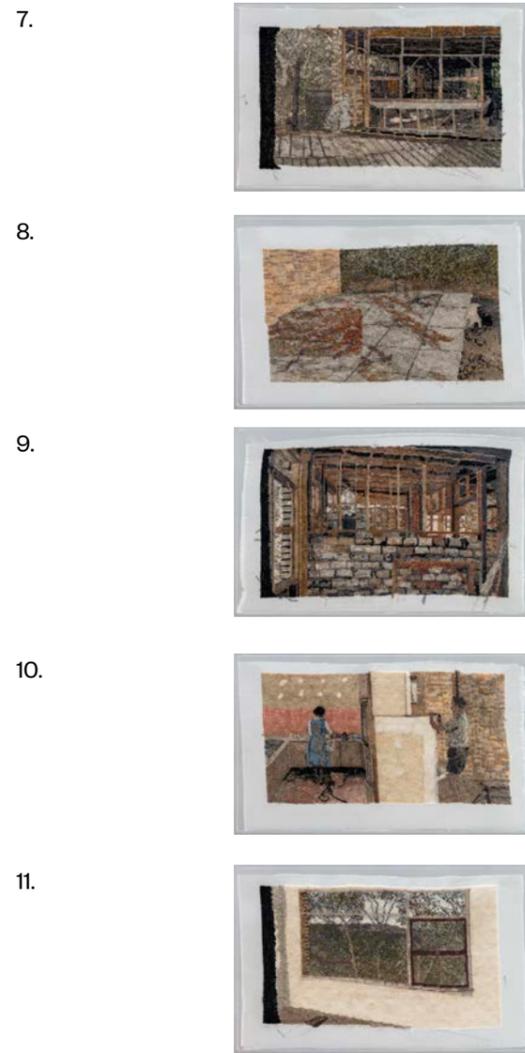


Narelle Jubelin

Contexto. For RDJ, RG & TH

23.03.24 — 11.05.24



Narelle Jubelin
Owner Builder of Modern California House
2001/2024
11 cotton thread on silk mesh petit point renditions in artist display units
each unit: 20 x 23 x 6.25cm
concrete and form ply support: 85 x 481 x 60 cm
TCG23013

Contexto.

For Raymond D Jubelin, Ross Gibson & Tess Horwitz.

Acknowledging

Merle, Rodney & Sheryn Jubelin, Kathryn Bird, Tony, Ara & Liam Steel. Marcos Corrales Lantero & Nelson Corrales Jubelin, Manuel García Paredes and Stephen Ralph.

Acknowledgement

The Dharug/Darug people are the original owners of the land on which this house was built.

The Commercial is located on the traditional lands of the Gadigal People and the neighbouring Kameygal and Wangal Peoples. The Gumbramorra wetlands upon which Marrickville is built were drained by colonists in the 1890s for its current industrial use. The Gumbramorra ecosystem has sustained First Nations people for countless generations. We pay our respects to all those who have lived and are now living in this place.

It is with great pleasure that The Commercial presents *Narelle Jubelin: Contexto. For RDJ, RG & TH*, an exhibition of one of the artist's most significant works which has been exhibited on four continents and more than four contexts. Those contexts include national, institutional, material and personal. At its core, this work is both deeply personal and broadly human. Jubelin's *Owner Builder of Modern California House* series has been addressed by numerous writers. This exhibition is accompanied by a new essay by Amelia Wallin for which we are exceptionally grateful.

Narelle Jubelin's (b. 1960, I. Madrid) research-based practice directs our attention towards fragments of larger histories. Her work furnishes evidence of complex interrelationships between the alternately dystopian and utopian stories of imperialism and modernism, demonstrating that in small things lie the analytical tools for a deeper, more probing understanding of dominant discourses. In the case of the ideals of modernism, the life-impacting fields of object design and architecture occupy her work often viewed through the lens of the social. This sense of moments taken from scenarios more vast is emphasised by her insistence upon the miniature as both a pictorial format and an ethics for production of objects. These thoughts in turn feed into observations of the flow of economic systems within which objects circulate. Jubelin's favoured medium of hand-scaled petit point sewing (cotton thread on silk mesh) is an amalgamation of the considerations of the photographic and the painterly.

Jubelin has exhibited extensively internationally. In 1990, she exhibited in the Aperto section of the Venice Biennale, curated by Giovanni Carandente. In 2022, the Centro Galego de arte Contemporánea in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, presented *Narelle Jubelin — Nalgures*, curated by Natalia Poncela López, an associated monographic publication is forthcoming. Jubelin has lived in Madrid since 1996. *Contexto. For RDJ, RG & TH* is Jubelin's third solo exhibition with The Commercial.

THOUGHTS ON MODERNIST HOUSES

text by Amelia Wallin

Modern architecture died in 1972, according to architectural critic Charles Jencks. Jencks attributed its death to the demolition of 33 social housing buildings, known as Pruitt-Igoe, in Missouri, USA. Built two decades earlier as a housing solution for the urban poor, failures in maintenance and systemic neglect led to the eventual collapse of Pruitt-Igoe by controlled implosion. At the same time as plans for public housing were being drawn up to accommodate working classes, white middle class families were relocating to the suburbs in both America and Australia. A number of modernist architectural initiatives capitalised on the suburban post-war housing boom, producing plans for low-cost single-family dwellings. The Case Study House program (1945-66) made available architectural plans for modern homes that could be constructed out of inexpensive materials in Los Angeles and wider California. Similarly in Melbourne in 1947, acclaimed Australian architect Robin Boyd directed the Small Homes Project, an endeavour that sought to make well-designed modern homes accessible to a broader public via the broad circulation of architectural plans at affordable prices.¹

It is this era of modernist optimism and architectural utopianism that artist Narelle Jubelin situates her body of work, *Owner Builder of Modern California House*. First completed in 2001, the series now consists of 11 petit-points, based on a number of photographs taken by her father, Raymond, in 1964. The photographs detail the construction of the Jubelin family home, situated on a triangular block on Dharug/Darug land, in what was then a newly developed suburb northwest of Sydney. The blonde brick building was built by her parents and a crew of helpers, and remains occupied by Jubelin's mother Merle. There's optimism and anticipation in these images; the wooden frame of the house is exposed, bricks pile up, people cluster in discussion, in the foreground deliveries of materials wait to be assembled. Yet with construction there is inevitable destruction, the felled trees, the cleared shrubbery, the materials extracted from the earth. The struck through word of Jubelin's title — California — attests to this undoing of place. With the crossing out of the geographical identifier, Jubelin decontextualises the 'modern house'. It is everywhere and nowhere. The title also reminds us how easily one settler colony can be transplanted atop another. The suburban modern home is reproduced on Indigenous land from Los Angeles to Melbourne to Sydney. As Ambelin Kwaymullina urges, "there is no part of this place / that was not / is not / cared for / loved / by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nation".²

'Modernism pulls us in all directions' artist Margaret Morgan observes, writing on the same body of work at its exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in 2001. As an aesthetic and a movement, modernism holds an aspirational quality for many of us. Yet modernism presumes a universality and fosters hegemonies. In many ways it is a second hand modernism that Jubelin favours, not the original object but its photographic reproduction in architectural magazines and the archives of family and friends. I'm writing this text upon my own modernist reproduction, a table that follows an open-source design by Enzo Mari. In 1974 Mari, a self proclaimed communist, published *Proposta per*

un'Autoprogettazione (Proposal for a Self-Design). Designed to be assembled from readily available timber lengths and requiring only nails and a hammer, Mari's plans were intended to be accessible. For Mari, the process of making is more valuable than the commodity being made, because of the skills and the time imbued in the work. Like Jubelin's petit-points, the object is threaded through with the process of its making.

Who inherits the no longer 'affordable' mid century single family dwelling? And whose post-war modernist social apartments are demolished by controlled implosion or sold off to developers? These questions of affordable and secure housing, of preservation and collapse, circulate in other works by Jubelin such as *The Housing Question*, with Helen Grace. They remain central, particularly in cities such as Sydney, with its rampant gentrification, and the historic activism and the recent community fights to save social and working-class communities in the inner city. In these questions of complicity and capital, I have a vested interest. In order to realise my own dream of home ownership, my family and I, once based in Sydney, moved to regional Victoria. Here land was cheaper, and we had the opportunity to build a modest house on our own triangular block. The bank prevented us from undertaking any construction ourselves (too risky; not a wise investment). Instead it is filled with hand made furniture of Mari's design.

Scholars Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek have evidenced the central role that home ownership plays in contemporary capitalism. "Beyond just economic impacts", they state, "housing has also been used to perpetuate a particular configuration of values around hard work, busyness, individualism, self-reliance, and family structure".³ It is this cluster of values that lie at the centre in the *Owner Builder* series, waiting to be untied. To be an owner builder is to be both the householder and the labourer, to be responsible not only for the house's construction but for its ongoing repairs and maintenance. The advent of the suburbs and the resulting individualisation of kitchens, gardens, living spaces, and garages led to the duplication of social reproductive work. The home remains a growing source of work, the maintenance of which is never done.

At Jubelin's own admission, *Owner Builder* was built between places — Sydney, Madrid, Los Angeles. Because of the slow duration of petit-point, place and context are threaded into each embroidery. Now in 2024, *Owner Builder of Modern California House* is brought into a new exhibition context, and is newly dedicated to late family and friends, including Raymond. What does it mean twenty years on, to revisit *Owner Builder*? Amidst the cost of living crisis, what does it mean to unpick the foundational ideas of single-family dwellings, the idea that everyone should have a patch of land when that land was stolen anyway? Our relationship to modernism is complicated and our relationship to home ownership is compromised and it is these unsettling complexities that Jubelin urges us to sit with.

—Amelia Wallin is a curator and writer living on Djaara in regional Victoria.

¹ It's worth noting that a currently small home is listed for sale at an asking price of \$1,250,000 - \$1,375,000.

² Ambelin Kwaymullina, 'Living on Stolen Land'. Broome: Magabala Books (2020), 3.

³ Helen Hester and Nick Srnicek, 'Shelter Against Communism', <https://www.eflux.com/architecture/workplac430312/shelter-against-communism/>, 2021.