



Amanda Davies, *Anodyne*, 2006

List of Artists

Lorraine Biggs, Pat Brassington, Dale Burke, Matt Calvert, Corinne, Simon Cuthbert, Amanda Davies, Judy Drew, Rodney Ewins, Barbie Kjar, Colin Langridge, Sally Rees, Leonie Reisberg, Carolyn Rodwell, Eric Rogers, Tom Samek, Mary Scott, John Scurry and Richard Wastell.



Matt Calvert, *Too Strange*, 2002

List of Images

Cover Image:

Tom Samek, *Australian Summer Smile 2*, 1976, etching, DCC Permanent Collection, acc. 1976.008

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Mary Scott, *Restless*, 2006, oil on linen, DCC Permanent Collection, acc. 2006.004

Pat Brassington, *Fragments of/From Memory #20*, 1992/2002, pigment print, edition 4/4, DCC Permanent Collection, acc. 2006.002

Amanda Davies, *Anodyne*, 2006, acrylic on plastic, DCC Permanent Collection, acc. 2010.001

Simon Cuthbert, *Mirror Mirror*, 2003, colour photograph, DCC Permanent Collection, acc. 2007.009

Sally Rees, *Encore*, 2005, single channel video, DCC Permanent Collection, acc. 2007.004

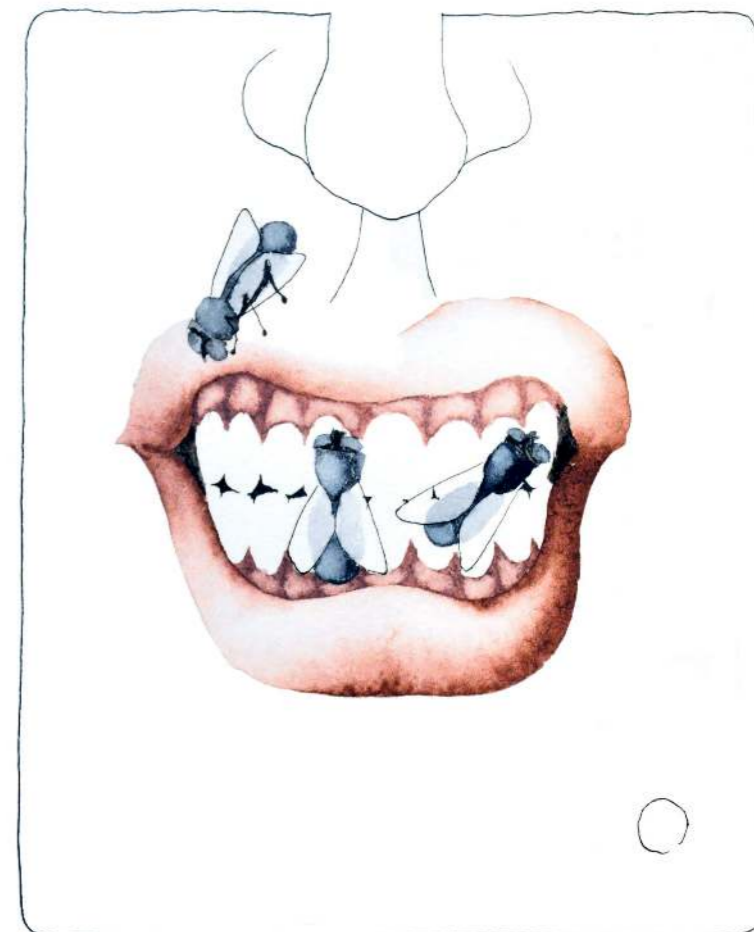
Matt Calvert, *Too Strange*, 2002, toughened glass and silicone, DCC Permanent Collection, acc. 2005.002

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 Devonport Regional Gallery, Upper Gallery
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 Saturday, Sunday & Public Holidays 7.30am–2.00pm



Uncanny



australian summer smile 2

Uncanny

The strange, mysterious and unsettling

The *uncanny* is hard to define. A niggling sense of discomfort, an instinctive reaction to un-naturalness, or a mystery you are unable to understand or explain - the uncanny is difficult to explain, because it is in essence a feeling.

The term *uncanny* was first explored in depth in 1906 by German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch in his essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*ⁱ. In his essay, Jentsch discusses the uncanny as something uncomfortably unfamiliar, which he called the *unheimlich*, or unhomey. Later, in 1919, Sigmund Freud used the term in his essay *The "Uncanny"*ⁱⁱ to describe not simply the unfamiliar, but the private or repressed.

Freud's analysis of the uncanny suggests several underlying catalysts, including the fear of death, or detached bodies; the psychology of the double or doppelganger; and an uncertainty as to whether something is human or not, animate or not. These underlying fears manifest when we encounter something that, despite its familiarity, we cannot fully comprehend. This can cause a sense of distress or unsettlement – an experience of the uncanny.

In art, a feeling of the uncanny can be aroused when a work is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, leaving an intellectual uncertainty punctuated by a feeling that something is off. A number of works in the Devonport Regional Gallery's permanent collection, included in this exhibition, have the potential to evoke these strange, mysterious and unsettling states of mind. Some have a surrealist feel, others are cropped or distorted

in ways that remove clues about their narrative, and many have an element that makes viewing them slightly uncomfortable. These works cause the mind to linger as you search for more information, try to fill in the blanks, or understand the feelings of unease the works evoke.

Logically, Mary Scott's painting *Restless* denotes an innocuous scene: there is nothing specific to suggest anything untoward is happening. However, the framing of the scene leaves a question of what is occurring beyond, creating a tension as our imagination is left to fill in the details the painting does not afford us. This tension is joined by discomfort as we examine the private domestic space like voyeurs. Scott's painting is simultaneously a plain and familiar domestic scene, while enshrouded with a sense of mystery and unease precisely due to the details we are deprived of, and where our mind may wander to fill them.

Similarly, in Pat Brassington's works we encounter familiar objects, often body parts, oddly distorted and



Mary Scott, *Restless*, 2006

decontextualised. The muted colours and haze of these works create a sense of a dream-like state where, as with Scott's work, we are left to construct a narrative driven by our own assumptions. In *Fragments of/From Memory #20*, the hand is both familiar to us, and an unknown entity as we question the identity and state of its owner. This lack of surety of its animation may leave us unsettled.

Amanda Davies' work *Anodyne* also has an ambiguous narrative. Its title taken from the painkilling medicine, *Anodyne* shows the scene of a hospital emergency department operating theatre. The hospital bed is empty, instead hosting what Davies refers to as 'an



Pat Brassington, *Fragment of/From Memory #20*, 1992/2002

invisible presence'. This presence offers an uncertain narrative: a staged scene to be completed by the viewer's own thoughts or projections. The empty bed may have been vacated by someone recently deceased, someone recently recovered, or be awaiting its next patient. Through her work, Davies has explored the psychology of our relationship to sickness and medical care, adopting the body as the primary site of this discussion. However, in this work the absence of the body is an equally potent symbol, which again leaves us unsettled in our inability to comprehend.

Simon Cuthbert decontextualises his works, framing photographs in ways that instead reveal the visual patterns



Simon Cuthbert, *Mirror Mirror*, 2003

and abstract qualities found in our urban environments. Like *Anodyne*, Cuthbert's photograph *Mirror Mirror* is devoid of a figure, where it seems expected that someone should be captured in the mirror's reflection. *Mirror Mirror* provides a clear reference to the Greek myth of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection, while we are denied any glimpse of our own reflection in the mirror. Again, this absence forces an intuitive response to the ambiguous scene.

The ego emerges in Freud's theory of the uncanny in a discussion of the double, which manifests from an impulse for self-preservation. The double is key in Sally Rees' work *Encore*, comprising a split screen video in which the artist is seen in double, once sober and once post 9 martinis, singing an aria from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*. Without contextualisation, we are driven to question the two divergent states of the artist.

While the double, death and decontextualization act as catalysts for the feeling of uncanny in many of these



Sally Rees, *Encore*, 2005

works, this feeling may occur in myriad circumstances when all is not what it seems. In Matt Calvert's work *Too Strange*, the whimsical creatures may appear on first inspection cute and cuddly. At a distance, their texture could be mistaken for foam, yet the shards of glass which merge to form these sculptures are both seductive and dangerous, drawing these seemingly innocuous creatures into the realm of the slightly more sinister. However, the danger posed by the glass fragments is again contradicted by the delicateness of these forms, which appear as though they could be re-dispersed at any moment.

What these works and others in *Uncanny* have in common, is that something is not quite as it appears. As we instinctively seek to make sense of their meaning, more questions remain than are answered, leaving us with a discomforting unsurety. These works may demonstrate the directions our minds take us when we are left to complete the missing pieces of the puzzle, raising the repressed and feared into a state of conscious unease.

However, despite attempts to define and demonstrate the uncanny, it is ultimately a feeling uniquely experienced by the individual – it may be elicited by something as simple as imagining the feeling of flies on our teeth.

Erin Wilson
Curator

ⁱ Ernst Jentsch, *On the psychology of the uncanny*, 1906

ⁱⁱ Sigmund Freud, *"The Uncanny"*, 1919