A gesture towards steam

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Scurry, scurry, scurry.

My mind moves, looking for purchase, searching for meaning, as I stand in front of Holly Yoshida's bathroom interiors. I feel an odd blankness as I stare at the white tiles, cream doors, the slightly off-square mirrors and windows, the pinkish walls.

I feel an absence of desire. As if the painter has leached all the messy human joy and heartbreak out of these rooms.

I am reminded of the momentary terror I feel every time I encounter the blank page of my computer when I come to write a new creative work. The sense that life is drained of all colour and drama; I see only white shapes taunting me with their trickster ability to morph and disappear in front of me.

The shell soap dish without soap, the empty shelf, not a speck of dirt in the tile grouting. A bath without taps, a shiny flat oval on the cabinet where a sink should be. I notice other oddities. Mirrors that reflect doors and windows in ways that aren't quite true. Shadows falling in two directions, the play of light unclear and confusing.

What are these spaces then? They are not the ideal home bathrooms of magazines. They are not the everyday messy space of a bedroom ensuite. They are recognisable, but unfamiliar also; everyday but strange.

Scurry, scurry, goes my mind; trying to bridge the gap between seeing and knowing.

When I was very young, I lived in a cold house in a cold country. There were seven of us and a small hot water system. We were each allowed a bath once a week. For many years, my younger sister and I shared our bath. Later I realised that allowed our mother extra hot water for herself. My mother was ingenious, and she had improved the insulation by creating her own double glazing through taping thick plastic sheeting on the inside of the windows. When the bath was running, the sheeting would steam up and you could draw on it. One evening I wrote "I hate piano lessons" on the plastic. After the steam dispersed, my message disappeared. But later that night, the words arrived like apparitions while my mother soaked in her warm bath. The next morning she asked me if I had written it. I said no, instinctively lying because I knew music was something important in our family. She said nothing in response, but that evening, she came and talked to me when I was reading in bed and said she knew I had written the note on the plastic and she understood that it was hard to learn an instrument but that perseverance would pay off. Of course, she didn't understand because I didn't tell my mother that I was afraid of my piano teacher with her harsh voice and sharp red-painted fingernails that hovered impatiently above my hands, especially when I made a mistake. I didn't tell her, either, that I was ashamed of that fear, and of lying to her. Nor, I suppose, would my mother have realised that for months afterwards entering the bathroom shamed me, and it was only my little sister's funny antics in the bath that eventually redeemed the space for me.

There are no children, no people, in the baths that Yoshida paints. In fact, three of the rooms seem completely unused, and one is unusable, for washing at any rate. Only in one of the paintings is there a sign of life: a single green hand towel. This small object pulses with energy, establishing a strange resonance with the viewer. If these works are still life, as Yoshida suggests[1], then the towel is like the fig, pomegranate or apple in a more traditional still life painting. It is not quite alive, but almost appears so, doing a small dance as if to flirt with the more sedate shower curtain. There is a gesture towards steam in this painting. Light appears to radiate from the mirror, and the vanity top is dark but also translucent. The closed door does not invite us to imagine the world outside this room. It is a place unto itself. A space of rippling white light, of illusion within the mundane.

The more I look at these paintings, the more complex this looking seems to be. Or rather, the more complex the act of seeing becomes. I become aware of how art comes alive in the exchange between artist and viewer, how rich and elaborate is the act of perception.

In our teenage years, after we moved to Perth, we had a showerhead above the bath and instantaneous hot water. I loved the luxury of long showers and being able to wash my hair properly. My father would knock on the bathroom door if he thought we were spending too long and wasting water. He claimed a long shower used more water than a bath and said that we should put the plug in the bath while we showered so we would realise how much water we were using. Strangely obedient, I sometimes did this and had a shower while standing in tepid ankle-deep water. Occasionally I still dream of that room, a modest family bathroom much like Yoshida's paintings. Sometimes, in my dreams, a ghostly presence knocks on the door.

It is no surprise that I am thinking about the past while looking at these images. Surely the bathroom is the room in which we most see our own ageing. Our feet are bare on the hard tiles, our bottoms unclothed on the toilet seat, our bodies naked in the shower, our faces illuminated with bright light in the mirror as we prepare ourselves for the day – or for the night. Even if we only look in the bathroom mirror twice a day, we will see our own face there over fifty-thousand times in an average lifetime.

Yoshida's paintings don't register time; indeed, they deny it. In contrast, the bathroom interiors of Spanish painter Antonio Lopez Garcia are filled with decay. In his works, "the past slowly dies before us" (as Mark Stevens says[2]). Benjamin Fraser says of Lopez Garcia's work that: "His paintings unceasingly redirect us from the simple perception of static objects in space toward a more complex notion of temporal experience."[3] There is no space without time, of course. And still life paintings (the convention Yoshida plays on here) often act to remind us of the fleeting nature of time.

I hardly remember all the bathrooms in all the houses in which I have lived. There were the mildewed shared bathrooms of bedsit land, the tiny showers of rental flats, the old bathroom in the middle of a weatherboard house with a window opening into the sleep out. And now, I have an

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[1] Yoshida, H. (2022) John Stringer Prize Finalists Notes. John Curtin Gallery, p. 6.
[2] Add reference.
[3] Fraser, B. (2014) Antonio López García's Everyday Urban Worlds : A Philosophy of Painting, Bucknell University Press, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=1784781.

ensuite with white and brown tiles and a shower big enough for two but no bath. Like most people, I forget to see what is everyday. Only after looking at Yoshida's paintings do I think about my own bathroom, and wonder what psychological interior it reflects. It is neither glossy nor sterile. The paint around the mirror is rubbing off, the tile grout is darker than it should be, one side of the cabinet is slightly swollen from water damage, and the matching towels don't match. There is light flooding through a mottled glass window, illuminating dust motes and a smear on the mirror. My bathroom is closer to a Lopez Garcia than a Yoshida painting.

My mind's scurrying no longer worries me. I enjoy the movement as I stand in front of these empty rooms. Make space and our minds will fill it. Fraser, talking of Lopez Garcia, says it this way: "The representation of space (of spaces) leads us back toward contemplation of an ever-mobile human consciousness. Light and detail are the vehicles of this transformative shift in perception; its end goal is none other than a reassessment of our own thinking."[4]

This, I think, is the gift of visual art: we observe, we remember, we reflect, and we change. Time passes, space engulfs us, the planet shifts.

[4] Fraser, B. (2014) Antonio López García's Everyday Urban Worlds : A Philosophy of Painting, Bucknell University Press, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=1784781.