



Julian Laffan's 'Morning light' (detail) is inhabited with the emblems of the everyday. Pictures: Supplied

Celebrating the ordinary in confinement art

Sasha Grishin

IN THE past couple of months, a new phenomenon has appeared in Australian art that can be termed lock-down art or Covid-19 art. This is art that has started to mirror the new reality of social confinement - a domesticity and an intimacy with a touch of cabin fever.

I have noticed in the past that, at times, artists felt that as their physical world contracted, the art they produced also developed an interior focus. I am thinking of the great, late glowing interiors of Grace Cossington Smith or, from more recent times, the backyard imagery of William Robinson. When I asked Robinson a couple of years ago why flower pieces, studio views and potted plants growing on the back porch started to dominate his art rather than the sweeping holistic images of rainforests, he simply replied that his reality had now changed and he celebrated what he now experienced in his daily life.

Julian Laffan is a Canberra-trained artist who has been living for many years in Braidwood where he is principal at the local primary school. He is basically a printmaker who for a number of years has not been printing his woodblocks as a matrix, but actually manipulates the birch wood ply blocks, after he has carved them, with gouache, oil paints and pencils to create from them little glowing tableaux. In the Australian context, Cressida Campbell has

developed a related technique and recently has been awarded the dubious honour of Australia's most expensive living female artist at art auction.

In earlier exhibitions, Laffan for his subject matter sought out the exotic - like postcards from his travels abroad - that he presented for our contemplation.

In this exhibition of 10 paintings (each measuring 34.5 by 34.5 centimetres) the focus has become much more internalised to the domestic interior of his house and studio. The works appear like snapshots of what he experiences every day but, as a visually literate artist, his interiors are open to associations with art traditions from the past.

Braidwood interior is a portrait of a wooden chair posed against the slanting floorboards and juxtaposed with a slice of nature glimpsed through a window.

In my mind there is something of a parallel with Vincent van Gogh's *Chair* (1888) painted in Arles and now in London. That painting may relate to the turbulence in van Gogh's relationship with Gauguin - a slice of autobiography. Laffan's chair is a far more tranquil affair and the work is more of a celebration of a well-known object in a much-loved interior.

Laffan's *Morning light* expands on the theme of an intimate interior inhabited with the emblems of the everyday. In the right corner of the composition stands a figure, which I take to be the artist's partner, Na-



'Braidwood interior' has echoes of Vincent van Gogh's 'Chair' (1888).

tasha, while the table is strewn with books. The vigorous cutting of the woodblock creates a dynamic movement in the work that is then balanced with dabs of colour that anchor and subdue the piece.

Kitchen utensils, canisters, jars, a jug with paintbrushes and other bric-a-brac of domestic life form some of the company of objects assembled in the woodblocks.

There is a touch of humour in some pieces as the artist reflects on the slow time of confinement as a new wealth of experience is discovered in a reality that is too frequently overlooked.

Julian Laffan: Home front. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Exhibition can be viewed by appointment until May 24 and online: beavergalleries.com.au.