

# Who is Helen Hopcroft?

Hopcroft is an artist who trained at the University of Tasmania before travelling to London to complete a Masters degree in painting at the Royal College of Art. She is currently studying towards a PhD at the University of Newcastle and writes for a range of new and old media. She has published articles on subjects ranging from racing yachts to what will happen to Paris Hilton when she gets old.

## **Why is this exhibition called *The Secret*?**

The artist likes her paintings to contain hidden narratives, codes, puzzles and what used to be called 'VCR jokes' (cartoons where you'd only spot the funny if you hit pause.) The title of the exhibition comes from the large painting that shows two children opening a mysterious striped box witnessed by a group of curious animal onlookers.

## **So what's in the box?**

Hopcroft says it's up to the viewer, but she likes to think that the box contains a revelation, something that will change everything. She is interested in the idea of secret histories of individuals, places and nations and what happens when events from the past intrude upon the present.

## **The paintings don't look particularly mysterious: they're brightly coloured and cheerful...**

That's the point. Hopcroft likes the tension generated when there's a contrast between style and content. She likes the historical anecdote about artists in the Soviet era hiding subversive content in children's book illustrations.

## **What are Hopcroft's influences?**

These paintings are inspired by a diverse range of styles, themes and genres including children's book illustration, cake decoration, folk art, early Renaissance religious imagery (particularly Annunciation themes), Indian and Persian miniatures, greeting cards, Australiana, 50s kitsch, embroidery and Tasmanian gothic.

## **Um, aren't some of these influences kind of naf?**

That's exactly right. Hopcroft wants to make art from all the things that are considered completely uncool in contemporary art circles. Her next mini project is try and make the frangipanni edgy.

## **Hasn't the American artist Jeff Koons already done everything that you can with kitsch?**

Yes and no: Koons says that he genuinely likes kitsch (so does Hopcroft) but his work speaks of the vacuousness of contemporary culture which isn't what Hopcroft is trying to express.

## **Why gave her the idea to start using this kind of imagery?**

The birth of her baby girl Sophie. Hopcroft found herself inundated by piles of pink, lacy, glittery presents from well meaning family and friends. At first she hated being surrounded by piles of kitsch, then after a while her aesthetic became corrupted and she actually started to enjoy it.

## **Does Hopcroft use much non visual reference material?**

Yes, the paintings have strong literary influences. The three books that inform this show are *Blood on the Wattle*, *A Child's Book of True Crime* and *Cape Grimm*.

## **What is Hopcroft going to do next?**

She would very much like to paint the writer Chloe Hooper for the Archibald, surrounded by characters from her book *The Child's Book of True Crime*. She is planning an exhibition titled *Baby Girl* where she plans to continue her quest to transcend kitsch (the question being: can you use really inane subject matter and still create images that have some kind of tension or emotional impact?) And she wants to spend a week dressed as Marie Antoinette, going about her everyday life (pumping iron at the gym, giving lectures, going to the supermarket, cleaning the house) while being filmed by a documentary film crew.

## **Why Marie Antoinette?**

Hopcroft just thought it would be fun and she likes the clothing from this era. She hasn't theorised the project to any great extent, but expects it's part of an ongoing fascination with ideas about femininity and gender roles in contemporary society.