

# ARUSHA

GALLERY

## The Bed in the Corner: The Familiar Unfamiliar

Susan Sontag famously wrote in her 1978 essay *Illness as Metaphor* that “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.” After suffering the effects of long Covid, artist Anna Rocke was forced to pass over into the kingdom of the sick. The symptoms of the illness sparked a change in her body. It became strange and alien, a body she no longer understood. The works in her new exhibition *The Bed in the Corner*, on show at Arusha gallery, Bruton, explore this unfamiliarity, responding to her chronic illness and the altered landscape of her existence.

Many of the paintings that encompass *The Bed in the Corner* depict the mundane, domestic scenes of everyday life. There are kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms. These are intimate spaces, rooms that are comfortable and comforting, places we drift through without giving it much thought. But while many of us are able to leave home — for work, to socialise, for food — these dwellings occupied by the house-bound begin to take on a new shape. In *Leo’s Bed* (2022), a large, four poster bed stands in a seemingly empty room. What makes this work unsettling is the way paint has been applied in thick, textured lines — perhaps with a palette knife — covering the walls so that they look as though they have come alive, pressing in on the bed to create a suffocating environment that is difficult to escape.

This feeling of claustrophobia is echoed, too, in other paintings, such as *Night Tales* (2023). In this work, a man sleeps alone in a bed. The bed itself appears too large for him, almost swallowing him completely. Similarly, in *Blue Bedroom* (2022), an overbearing atmosphere is articulated through a series of nine small canvases, each showing a different view of the same blue room. The series is reminiscent of the experience of being unwell, confined to bed, forced to stare at the same four walls for days. This confinement exists even while a door stands invitingly ajar, leading to a flight of stairs representative of a kind of freedom. In all of these paintings, Rocke uses the distortion of familiar places, to explore the uncanniness of living in a body that she can no longer trust, that has become unpredictable with ever-changing symptoms. The paintings take on the quality of living, as if, in some way, they themselves are representations of her body.

Throughout the exhibition, interiors appear as isolating settings. Rocke tells me that when she was confined to her home, she would always wonder what her friends were doing. She felt as though she had been left behind because she was not able to go out and socialise with them. This loneliness manifests itself in her paintings. Nearly all of them are devoid of people, empty rooms that at times feel cold or abandoned (food left on tables, clothing discarded on floors). The few people who do appear are always alone, always in environments that dwarf them, as in *Tea Party* (2022) where a girl sits on the floor next to a huge bed, playing with oversized toys, or *Milmot* (2022) showing a young girl standing in front of a tree that stretches high above her.

By subverting expectations of scale in these works, Rocke conjures a disorienting, ambiguous and warped reality that serves to make visible the experience of living in a sick body, one that no longer feels like home. Rocke paints places she knows well — her own home, her grandmother's house — and places that are imagined. Through this, she skews the notion of “home” with strange viewpoints and odd angles. The thick, brightly coloured paint also gives the works a surreal, dream-like quality that further transports the viewer to a kind of outer-body experience. And yet, there is a tactility, too, through the way they are painted — heavily textured surfaces that seemingly invite the viewer to touch them.

Although most of the paintings included in the show are of domestic dwellings, the outside is often present, shown through windows, or, in the case of *Pink Chair* (2023), through an open door. In this painting, the distinction between outside and in is not easily defined. A pink wicker chair sits next to a red sofa, green tiles covering the floor and a blue tasselled rug. Behind the chairs are potted plants, and blue pillars, the same colour as the trees in the distance. It is not clear whether these pillars are themselves close-up tree trunks, or the frames of large glass windows. A door to the right opens out onto the garden beyond, as though it were a continuation of the interior (a lightbulb can be seen poking out from behind a tree).

The merging of interior and exterior reads as a way to counteract being trapped inside, or a way to escape into a daydream in which there is not distinction between the two, where a sick body can exist both within and outside of its limitations. And yet, when looking closely at the interior rooms, you start to notice there are doorways that lead to doorways, that lead to doorways, endlessly as if each home were a labyrinth. Rocke is interested in the glimpses of things not quite seen, but this motif also exaggerates the sensation of being closed off inside a single space, unable to move freely throughout the home, or being trapped inside a cycle of illness. But although the paintings can seem haunting, Rocke's use of vibrant colours in her later works act as a form of hope into a brighter future in which she might again return to the kingdom of the well.