

Artist of the week 35: Emma Talbot

Jessica Lack continues her series on contemporary artists with Emma Talbot, whose eerie paintings give a supernatural thrill



Jessica Lack

theguardian.com, Wednesday 1 April 2009 12.08 BST



Spectres... a section of Emma Talbot's *Haunted House* (2008). Photograph: Helen Baker/Gallery North

Emma Talbot's oil paintings look like doll's houses with the facades peeled back. But inside lies a charnel of repressed emotions, as ghosts collide with the living, rapping on doors, lurking in rooms. Talbot calls them psychological stories, and they grew out of a desire for emotional honesty after the death of her husband Paul. Some of these paintings detail the couple's life together, through the dingy flats they inhabited as students and the story of their two small children. *Tenement* (2008), for instance, revolves around a house in Hackney; each floor depicts a different stage of the artist's life, from the dreams and aspirations of a wannabe pop act on the first floor to the tears and recriminations in the attic.

Others record the artist's ancestry, following tales recounted to her as a child. In each painting, the spectre of imminent tragedy lurks. There is something in the vacant faces, purposely kept featureless by the artist so as not to distract from the larger narrative, which suggests these stories don't have a happy ending. A mother dressed in a coat and hat, carrying a suitcase, walks past a bed in which three children sleep; a figure cowers

as a window shatters overhead; a child is beaten over the back of a sofa.

Happier times are elaborately decorated and painted in plush colour, with a dated, otherworldly quality. The groovy hair, straight out of a Biba fashion drawing, the retro wallpaper with its discs of yellow ochre and orange, the cramped domestic settings – all are reminiscent of the early 1960s. Yet, as the pain unfolds, the paint drains away until the rooms are minimal, white boxes, the hurt too raw to convey. There are elements of Ann Jellicoe's play *The Knack* here, also the claustrophobia embodied in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. The result reveals the intangibility of that which we hold dear.

Why we like her: For the painting *Haunted House* (2008). A séance is conducted in an attic while below fortune tellers, tarot card readers and poltergeists cause merry havoc. It's like every supernatural thriller rolled into one, without the ectoplasm.

Not surprising ... that Talbot is very superstitious, fascinated by paranormal activity. She once visited a psychic who knew about a locket her dying husband had given her.

Where can we see her? Emma Talbot's paintings can be seen in the exhibition *Storytime*, at Gallery North, Northumbria University until 10 April 2009