

## RIGHT NOW WHO

Words by ALEX SPEED



**PAINTER GRIA SHEAD** keeps the words of Australian still-life artist Margaret Olley in mind as she works. “Margaret always said, ‘Paint what is in front of you’ and it’s a mantra that I live by,” says the Sydney-based artist. “What she meant is not to search too far from what’s close to you and relates to your life. For her, that was painting her home. For me, it is finding a common thread linking me to the interiors of the buildings I paint.”

Gria paints richly coloured, highly detailed figurative works of the interior details of houses. Her paintings from Hill End, where she lived for 10 years with her former husband, landscape painter Luke Sciberras, and their daughter, Stella, breathed life into the harsh landscape and frozen pasts of historic houses in the NSW goldrush town.

A quiet vitality pervades Gria’s studies of the smaller objects from lives past, offering an intimate view of their subject. “I like to leave my paintings open, without too much of my take on who might have just walked out of the room,” says the artist. “So, that allows the viewer to look at a painting and imagine themselves in that space and feel a sense of freedom.”

Gria’s latest series of work, mainly oil on board, captures tableaux within Vaucluse House, an Historic Houses Trust property in Sydney’s eastern suburbs, originally built by influential colonist William Wentworth, with its overtones of colonial splendour and servitude. “Vaucluse House is a lot prettier than some of the other houses I have painted. I love the aesthetics: the French wallpaper, the exquisite rugs and carpets, and its upstairs opulence. But my favourite part of the house is the servants’ quarters, which act as a wonderful juxtaposition to the grandeur.”

The paintings will be exhibited in July and August at Tim Olsen Gallery in Sydney, and map Gria’s journey to find her worth as an artist, she says. As a young woman, Gria also spent time drawing in the Vaucluse House gardens. Her interest in historical spaces, and her place in them, has grown to inspire her work. “I don’t paint a room so much as point to the story told by the fabrics, colours and furniture within.”

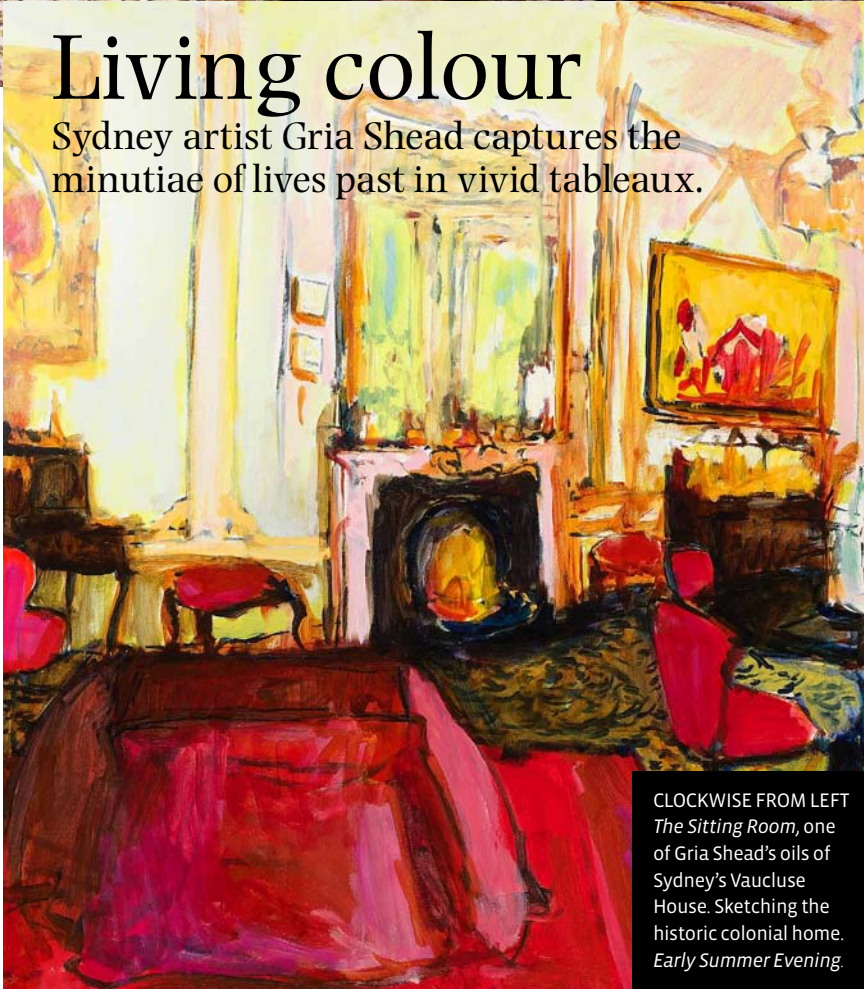
These paintings are perhaps lighter and more animated than previous works, says the artist, who aims to imbue her works with details of the lives spent within that space, based on history and a light personal touch on the subject. “Vaucluse House was run by Wentworth’s wife, Sarah, who was very much mistress of the house and an independent woman in her own right in that era. That interests me greatly as I feel myself gaining a sense of my own worth as an artist and potential as an individual.

“I think I have always been searching for the perfect home, one that combines home life with studio space in equal measures,” says Gria. “That’s what Luke and I intended when we moved to Hill End – making a home for Stella and finding that idyllic country life. And for a long time it was. But as my life and work progressed, I needed my own space.”

Gria’s exhibition, *In the House*, will show at Tim Olsen Gallery, 63 Jersey Road, Woollahra, NSW from July 18–August 5, 2012.

## Living colour

Sydney artist Gria Shead captures the minutiae of lives past in vivid tableaux.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT  
*The Sitting Room*, one of Gria Shead’s oils of Sydney’s Vaucluse House. Sketching the historic colonial home. *Early Summer Evening*.