

In Every Dream Home a Heartache – Margaret Mitchell’s Ordinary Eden

Home...
Where the heart is...
A room of one’s own...
A place to belong...
Somewhere safe...

These are the everyday mantras we are meant to take for granted as we grow up in the sanctuary of a loving family, before stepping out into the big bad world to try and build a home of our own. And as we follow in our parents’ footsteps, we presume the property ladder we attempt to climb will lead towards a wonderland of all the hand-me-down dreams we ever wanted.

Such are the aspirational expectations picked up from the wobbly-walled domestic interiors of middlebrow TV dramas and sit-coms set in imaginary suburban idylls, where what we used to call nuclear families feed each other punchlines in RADA accents. Anything messier is shamelessly shoved to the margins and patronised as something called ‘kitchen-sink’. If you have a kitchen, that is. Or a sink.

Absences like these are there in the photographs of *An Ordinary Eden*, Margaret Mitchell’s series of portraits of seventeen people whose experiences of home are as different from the des-res makeovers on TV as they are from each other. Living room furniture is at a minimum, with a lack of personal touches that suggests the sole occupants are expecting they might have to flit to the next temporary stopover at a moment’s notice. They may be travelling light, but their baggage weighs heavy in other ways.

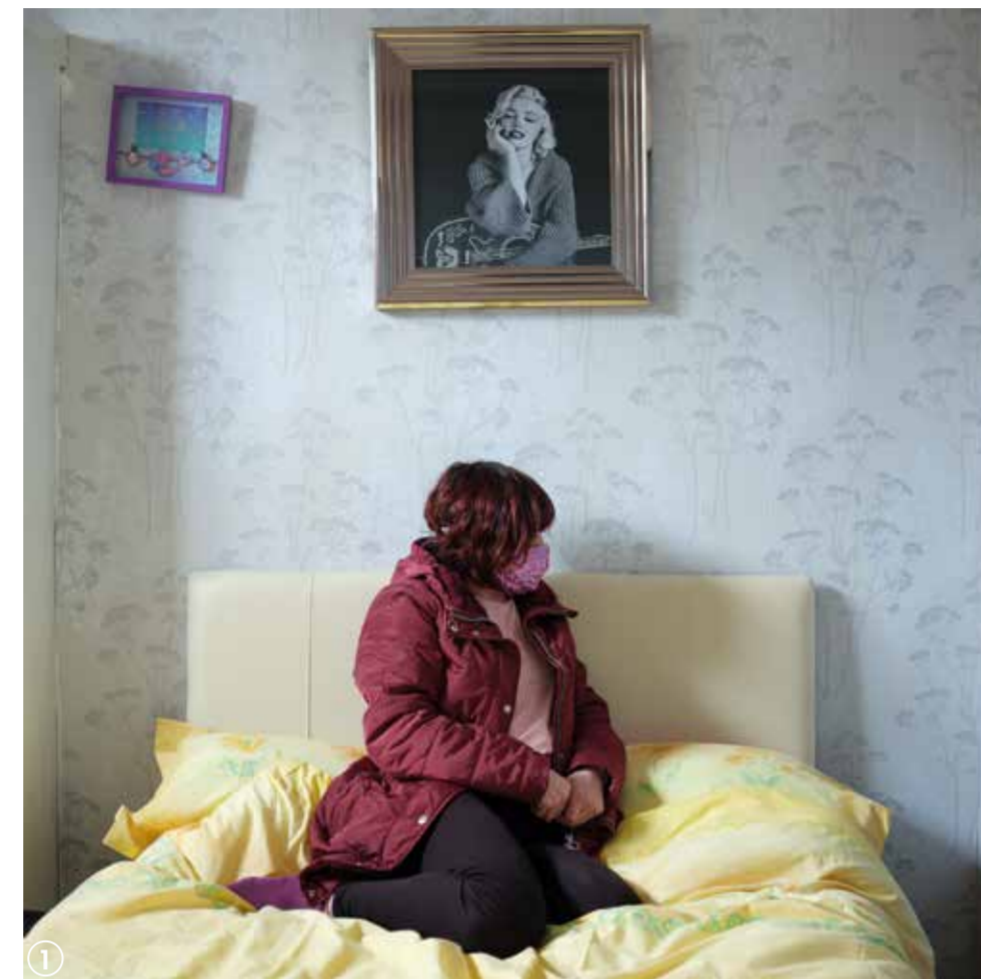
The stories of those who Mitchell met are all different. There are no catch-all generalisations here. Every life stands alone. Every experience unique. Some are in temporary accommodation. Others are now more settled, but still bear the scars of their recent past. Others are photographed on the cusp of a new chapter, shortly after moving into their first permanent home in many years. Others similarly have somewhere permanent to stay, but still need support to make it work.

But there is room for hope. It’s there in the way in one photograph the previously homeless Tam sits on the balcony of his high-rise flat, looking out onto the wide open space of his city, settled at last. It’s there too in the empty picture frames on Graeme’s wall, waiting to be filled with memories.

An anonymous woman sits on her bed, her face hidden from the camera beneath a framed picture of Marilyn Monroe posing with a guitar on her lap and a cigarette held airfully aloft, the ultimate in Hollywood glamour.

go the rest of us, Mitchell remains an outsider, even as she is in the thick of things. Her observations may be seen from the professional distance of her lens, but she knows where she comes from. Even though she moved away, she still carries her past with her. Mitchell’s prodigal’s return in *Family* and *In This Place* shows how, in her case, moving away from home can open you out to new experiences. It also shows how returning with acquired wisdom and experience can help see things with the fresh eyes of someone who doesn’t quite belong there anymore. This is what coming home feels like.

Neil Cooper



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AN ORDINARY EDEN
MARGARET MITCHELL

The tattoo on Michael’s neck has been altered from its original words of hate to one representing new beginnings and fresh starts. This is the ‘Eden’ that gives Mitchell’s exhibition its title and its own sense of place to aspire to.

Such potential Edens are perhaps best exemplified by Mitchell’s photograph of Lyndsey. This is only one of two images in *An Ordinary Eden* that features a second person.

After many years of temporary housing and personal insecurity, Lyndsey sits in the bedroom of her now permanent home with her young daughter. Lyndsey’s daughter sits on the bed at the foreground of the picture, staring down the camera as if on guard, protecting her mum from anyone who dares try and get past her. Lyndsey sits behind her, holding a cuddly toy her daughter gave her, something to hold on to when she’s not there. This is a sanctuary now. A fortress. This is where love lives.

While the stories of those in Mitchell’s photographs are commonplace enough to render them invisible, their lives are far from ordinary. For all the seeming stillness in the pictures, many are only pausing a moment to catch their breath and a little space before they’re on the move once more.

Mitchell has spoken elsewhere of her photographs being part of a constant negotiation with those in them. In the case of *An Ordinary Eden*, she spent four years navigating her way around these lives in motion. This process was further complicated by the Covid induced lockdowns that for two years put the entire world in a state of solitary confinement.

The end result of *An Ordinary Eden* doesn’t patronise or sensationalise in a way less sensitive photographers might do. The trust between Mitchell and those in her pictures is palpable. They are not subjects, in a way that would render them second-class citizens. They are participants. While the shots are posed, usually in a state of isolation in often spartan surroundings that leave them exposed, with nothing hidden, there is something heroic about them. In this way, Mitchell is breaking down the walls of heartache that come with every dream home.



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Margaret Mitchell is an award-winning photographer based in Glasgow. Her work ranges from exploring communities and children’s worlds through to long-term projects on social inequality. Bridging the psychological and the social, her work explores the intricacies and complexities of people’s lives with a particular emphasis on place and belonging. She has exhibited widely including at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh (2017 & 2022), the National Portrait Gallery, London as part of the *Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize* (2014 & 2022), and at *Street Level Photoworks* as part of *Ambit - Photographies from Scotland* (2017) with the series *In This Place*, which was also shown in an expanded form in a *Street Level* offsite exhibition at Lillie Art Gallery. Following *Ambit* her work was acquired for the permanent collection of the National Galleries of Scotland. She also has work in the collections of the Martin Parr Foundation and Stirling University. Her book *Passage* (Bluecoat Press, 2021) reflects on a cycle of inequality, asking questions on the nature of disadvantage and privilege in a study over three generations. She works both on personal projects and commissions and work has been featured in the *Guardian*, *De Correspondent*, and the *New Statesman* amongst others.

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|---|----------------------------|---|
| Front: | Daniel close to his hostel | 9. Mark close to home |
| 1. Name withheld | | 10. Name withheld (studio flat) |
| 2. Michael in his temporary accommodation | | 11. Mark |
| 3. Tam on his balcony | | 12. Marcus, age 31, in his first ever home at Christmas |
| 4. Summer visiting her mum | | 13. Najib out the back of his temporary accommodation |
| 5. Graeme’s living room wall | | Back: From the series ‘An Ordinary Eden’ |
| 6. Ryan in his living room | | |
| 7. Graeme in his living room | | |
| 8. MC between hostels | | |

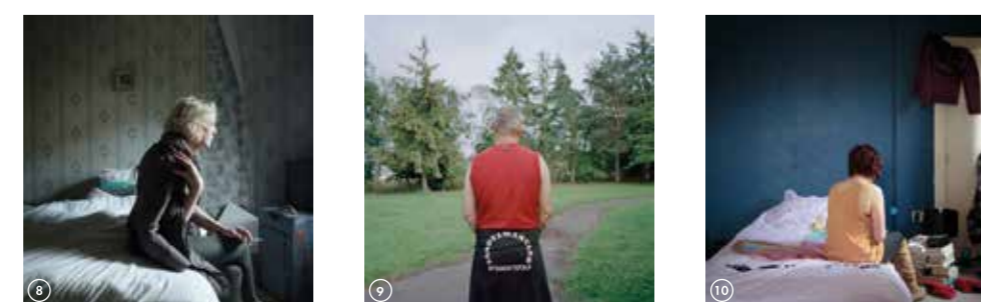
Neil Cooper is a writer and critic based in Edinburgh. He has written about visual art for *Scottish Art News*, *MAP*, *The List*, *Line*, *The Drouth* and *Bella Caledonia*. He has written essays for *Collective*, *Edinburgh*, *Ortonvandal* @ *Embassy*, *Edinburgh*, *Alt.Gallery*, *Newcastle*, *Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art*.

He recently wrote a text for Benjamin Owen’s *The New Vocal Club* @ *Perth Theatre*, and a four part essay on artist run spaces for the *Dissenter* for *Space Studies*.

An ongoing archive of his work can be found at coffeetablenotes.blogspot.com

Street Level’s premiere of *An Ordinary Eden* makes for a homecoming of sorts for Mitchell too. It was here she first showed *In This Place* (in the group exhibition *Ambit: Photographies from Scotland* in 2017), a companion piece to the equally personal *Family* (1994). Both look at the complex lives of Mitchell’s sister and her children growing up in the Raploch and St Ninians areas of Stirling. With more than two decades between them, the two collections chart several generations of lives that have faced some of the same complexities as those in *An Ordinary Eden*. These earlier chapters are collected in the book *Passage* (2021), published by Bluecoat Press, and since then, she has been working on an unexpected third chapter, which has yet to be revealed in full.

Like previous work, *An Ordinary Eden* is part of Mitchell’s life as much as those in her photographs. As she bears witness to those who there but for the grace of God or whoever



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