

The Kitchen Sink Too

Curatorial Essay by **Abi Shapiro**

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Abstract

The Kitchen Sink Too: British Art 1945–1975 is a project led by Research Curator, Abi Shapiro at Museums Sheffield. The project undertakes research into Sheffield’s post-war visual art holdings to improve public access to the collection through a range of activities and events including the exhibition, “*This Life is So Everyday*”: *The Home in British Art 1950–1980*, on display at the Graves Gallery in Sheffield (30 March 2019–6 July 2019). In this essay, Abi Shapiro reflects on the invisibility of women’s perspectives of domesticity in early post-war art, and the process of working with community groups to develop research towards the exhibition’s theme of “home”.

The home and domesticity were the main subjects of “kitchen sink” painting, a short-lived style of realism active in London between 1952 and 1957. The four artists typically associated with this genre are Jack Smith, Edward Middleditch, Derrick Greaves, and John Bratby. Unlike other “schools” or movements in early twentieth-century British art, the four did not group themselves based on mutually agreed principles, but were linked by critics, curators, and their dealer, Helen Lessore at the Beaux Art Gallery, for a perceived commonality in style and their preference for domestic subject matter. From 1952, they were known as the Beaux Arts Quartet, until the critic David Sylvester colloquially described them in 1954 as painters of “the kitchen sink” and the name stuck.¹

In the histories of post-war British art, it remains widely unchallenged that these four men are the only “kitchen sink” artists.² Their works from the 1950s are considered as central in discourses of post-war representations of the home and labour, with critics and historians often locating “kitchen sink” painting’s legacy as a precursor to British pop art’s focus on everyday domestic objects.³ Yet despite the many “kitchen sink” works depicting women undertaking domestic labour, there is a lack of awareness of, and scholarship about, artworks made by women in the 1950s depicting the home. This has not only led to biased perspectives of representations of the home in post-war art, but it has also affected the way issues of gendered subjectivity and labour are (or aren’t) implicated in art-historical discourses of domesticity, as well as highlighting the fact that many women artists still remain absent from art’s histories.

In what can be considered a classic “kitchen sink” painting because of its mundane breakfast setting, in *Jean and Table Top (Girl in a Yellow Jumper)*, John Bratby depicts his new wife gazing blankly across their kitchen (fig. 1). With hands clasped at her lap and head tilted, Jean appears small next to the cluttered table of cereal boxes, washing powder, dirty bowls, empty teacups, and glass milk bottles left over from breakfast. The scene does not suggest Jean’s domestic bliss, but bears witness to her disengaged affect in this everyday reality.



Figure 1

John Bratby, *Jean and Table top (Girl in Yellow Jumper)*, 1953-1954, oil on board, 122.1 × 101.2 cm. Collection of Museums Sheffield (VIS.4712) Digital image courtesy of the artist's estate and Bridgeman Images. Photo courtesy of Museums Sheffield (all rights reserved)

John Bratby repeatedly painted the home he shared with Jean Bratby (Cooke) throughout the 1950s and 1960s, recording the mundane details of their kitchen, bedroom, and living room (even twice painting their toilet).⁴ In these paintings Jean is often portrayed by John as despondent and passive. In his numerous self-portraits, John Bratby depicts himself within the domestic space but not necessarily engaged with it (or with Jean). This can be seen in *Kitchen Interior* where John stands removed from the scene with his hands in his suit pockets as Jean washes dishes (fig. 2). By documenting the interior of his material (and by extension, psychical) world for decades, Bratby honed a visual language that spoke not only of an unremarkable and everyday domesticity, but of a constructed and masculine domesticity that characterised his career and the genre of “kitchen sink” painting.⁵

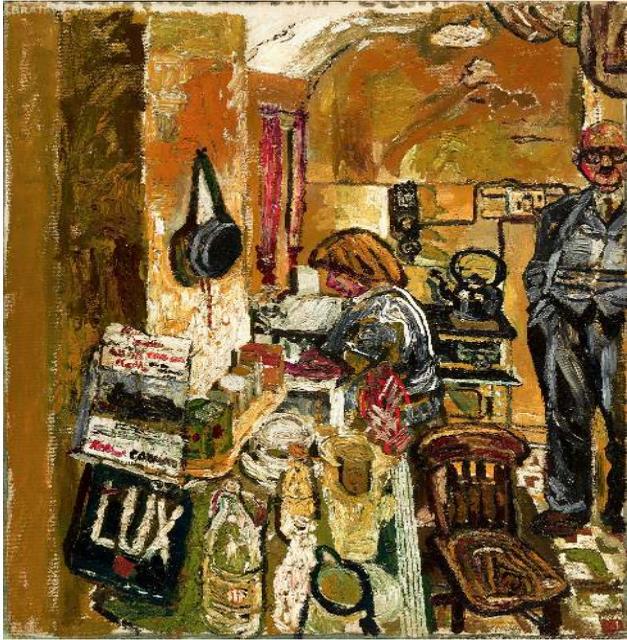


Figure 2

John Bratby, *Kitchen Interior*, 1955-1956, oil on board, 119.3 × 86.3 cm. Collection of Williamson Art Gallery & Museum (BIKGM:3355) Digital image courtesy of the artist's estate and Bridgeman Images. Photo courtesy of Williamson Art Gallery & Museum (all rights reserved)



Figure 3

Jack Smith, *Mother Bathing Child*, 1953, oil on board, 182.9 × 121.9 cm. Collection of Tate (T00005) Digital image courtesy of the estate of Jack Smith (all rights reserved)



Figure 4

Edward Middleditch, *Flowers, Chairs and Bedsprings*, 1956, oil on board, 112.7 × 175 cm. Collection of Tate (T06460) Digital image courtesy of the estate of Edward Middleditch and James Hyman Gallery, London (all rights reserved)

Using a thick impasto application of paint, usually in muted hues on large canvases, the four young male “kitchen sink” artists depict images of children and mothers in sparse and dingy kitchens (Smith) (fig. 3), still lifes of stove tops or upturned mattresses (Middleditch) (fig. 4), street scenes of children playing and Northern industrial cityscapes (Greaves) (fig. 5), and a cluttered family home and its inhabitants (Bratby).



Figure 5

Derrick Greaves, *Sheffield*, 1953, oil on canvas, 93.6 × 210.5 cm. Collection of Museums Sheffield (VIS.4586) Digital image courtesy of Derrick Greaves and James Hyman Gallery, London. Photo courtesy of Museums Sheffield (all rights reserved)

These unflinching images of daily life led to wider disagreements over realism as a politically motivated style. The artists denied this kind of intent with Smith nonchalantly stating, “I just painted the objects around me.”⁶ But “kitchen sink” painting was deployed as a pawn by critics debating the role of politics in art. In 1952, the socialist art critic John Berger insisted realism offered “a sharper meaning” to working-class reality.⁷ Yet for David Sylvester domesticity and realism were jointly rooted in art-historical traditions of painting interior space; subject was only a pretext for style.⁸ These debates brought attention to the young artists’ works, which reached a peak in 1956 when the four artists were chosen to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale (fig. 6). This was, however, a short-lived moment of notoriety. While this international exposure provided each artist with a degree of fame, and recognised “kitchen sink” painting as a celebrated trend, the genre’s popularity soon fell out of favour. By 1957 “kitchen sink” painting was more or less over.⁹



Figure 6

The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1956, photograph Digital image courtesy of James Hyman Gallery (all rights reserved)

As these debates about realism played out on national and international stages, the “kitchen sink” painters’ version of domesticity became synonymous with post-war social realism. Yet in terms of how we understand early post-war depictions of domesticity in British art and cultural history, this has served to foreground “home” as seen from the perspectives of young, white, straight men

in a heteronormative framework. Research by Greg Salter usefully explores the presentation of masculinity and domesticity in 1950s paintings by male artists (including Bratby) offering an analysis of the way selfhood, masculinity, and home were negotiated according to post-war social values.¹⁰ Yet what other domestic narratives and subjectivities might appear by expanding the remit of “kitchen sink” realism beyond these four accepted artists?

This question is part of a wider research project at Museums Sheffield. The project, *The Kitchen Sink Too: British Art 1945–1975*, looks at Sheffield’s expansive modern British art collection of over 1,400 works of art to examine lesser-told stories both in the collection and in the history of British art more generally. The project aims to use research to improve public access and engagement with the collection through activities and events including an exhibition titled “*This Life is So Everyday*”: *The Home in British Art 1950–1980* at the Graves Gallery in Sheffield (30 March 2019–6 July 2019).

To focus the project towards developing an exhibition, the theme of home was chosen to trace a domestic trajectory across this thirty-year period in Sheffield’s collection. The project tracked approximately 150 artworks that relate to this theme from 1950s “kitchen sink” paintings, through to 1960s and 1970s pop art domestic objects, and feminist art in the 1970s. One aim was to undertake collection research and exhibition development that did not issue solely from the research curator’s viewpoint. As such, we sought input from the local community by working with groups with different domestic experiences during the period in question in order to explore various perspectives of “home”. This directed the sub-themes of the research as well as what would be included in the show and how it would be interpreted.

The first two groups we worked with were adults aged between 65 and 96 living in assisted accommodation in the Park Hill (fig. 7) and Manor Top areas located in the east of Sheffield.¹¹



Figure 7

Sheffield City Centre, showing Parkhill flats under refurbishment, aerial view, 7 June 2011 Digital image courtesy of Chris Mattison and Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved)

Crucially, most of the residents grew up and lived in South Yorkshire during the timeline of the project (1945–1975) and therefore we used museum collection objects to stimulate memories in a series of reminiscence sessions. A range of domestic issues materialised that we would not have otherwise considered. For example, there were stories about living in makeshift bomb shelters in the Sheffield blitz and stories of several families’ excitement about acquiring a first television set. People also described the mental and physical challenges of requiring extra support at home in

later life, which offered a key perspective on how home changes over a lifetime. As many participants were women, gendered domestic roles and the physical labour of home maintenance were also common themes. In terms of collection research, this encouraged questions about why “kitchen sink” paintings that often depicted women’s domestic labour were all made by men. The absence of women representing their own experiences directed a search for works in Sheffield’s collection made by women. These were, however, harder to find as they had a more subtle relationship to domesticity in the 1950s and 1960s and entered the collections at different times to other “kitchen sink” works. For example, Margaret Mellis (fig. 8) and Anne Redpath created still life compositions staged in their homes using their own domestic objects, and Mary Potter (fig. 9) and Winifred Nicholson painted the views from their home windows.

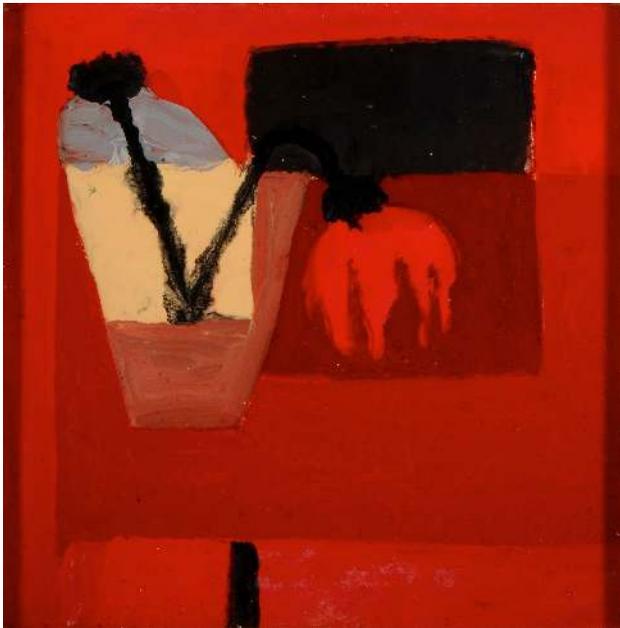


Figure 8

Margaret Mellis, *Red Flower*, 1958, oil on board, 39.4 × 39.1 cm. Collection of Museums Sheffield (VIS.4951) Digital image courtesy of the estate of Margaret Mellis. Photo courtesy of Museums Sheffield (all rights reserved)



Figure 9

Mary Potter, *End of Daylight*, 1954, oil on canvas, 74.2 × 99.6 cm. Collection of Museums Sheffield (VIS.2584) Digital image courtesy of the estate of Mary Potter, DACS 2019. Photo courtesy of Museums Sheffield (all rights reserved)

We also worked with people living in Sheffield who attend the Conversation Club, a community-run group designed for refugees and asylum seekers to practise English and socialise. The activities we ran focused on writing personal responses to collection objects that related to the theme of home. Works that solicited strong aesthetic and emotional reactions were selected for inclusion in the exhibition with individuals’ corresponding responses put on display. This encouraged more expansive ways of researching by thinking about what “home” means as Britain negotiates its national and international identity and borders for Brexit. For those (including myself) who have migrated to Britain, we discussed how “home” is often multiple places and identities at once, which can sometimes feel in conflict. This invited an exploration of artists in Sheffield’s collection who had made Britain their home, as well as acknowledging the collection’s lack of representation of artwork by some of the post-war migrant communities specific to the region.¹² This led to researching prints by Avinash Chandra, an Indian-born

British artist (fig. 10), and Josef Herman, a Polish-born British artist, both of whom explored their cross-cultural heritage in their practices during the 1950s and 1960s. As is the case in most public British art collections, artists of colour, especially women of colour, are poorly represented in this period of Sheffield's collection.¹³ This stimulated research into BAME artists working in the early post-war period and making suggestions for future displays and acquisitions.



Figure 10

Avinash Chandra, *Drawing 3*, 1963, watercolour, 57.1 × 66 cm. Collection of Museums Sheffield (VIS.3419)
Digital image courtesy of the estate of Avinash Chandra. Photo courtesy of Museums Sheffield (all rights reserved)

With both groups, “home” materialised as a mutable and complex concept that could not be pinned down to even a small group of issues. Yet it was clear that domesticity has played a powerful role in people’s lives and the way their social and cultural subjectivities are shaped. For women in particular, domesticity has been a framework in the formation of private and public identities. Feminist historians and cultural theorists have shown the many ways women have been (and still are) politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised because of the presumed correlation between their reproductive capabilities and suitability to do domestic work (including home maintenance and child care).

In recent decades, scholars have tracked “a domestic turn” in the twenty-first century driven by the upheavals of traditional gender roles in post-war society. Bearing witness to this turn, contemporary art and feminist scholarship continues to explore how our configurations of home shape our understanding of the world. Common issues raised include the distinction between public and private space, the politics of labour, nationalism and globalism, bodily rights and subjectivities, and how our relationships to objects construct our material lives.¹⁴

As a research curator, my interest in the home and my methods in this project are indebted to these scholarly discourses and linked to recent discussions in feminist and queer art histories of “new domesticities”. This refers to approaches to material culture that consider domesticity as not only a theme or content for art but also as a critical lens through which to re-examine networks of cultural production and revise canons that privilege certain versions of domesticity (and domestic subjectivities) over others.¹⁵

These methodologies of “new domesticities” have wide-reaching implications for revisiting and rethinking “kitchen sink” painting and domestic narratives in post-war social realism. For example, when exploring works of art that address key domestic concepts such as the normative family or gendered divisions of domestic labour, we need to account for whose artistic perspectives are shaping these representations of home. This is not to say that we must insist on knowing the artistic intention of depicting domestic life, but instead it means resisting the replication of domesticity in art galleries from the same privileged points of view, and also taking into account what or who is not represented.



Figure 11

Margaret Mellis, *Woman and Fish II*, 1957, oil on board, 76.2 × 54.6 cm. Collection of Jerwood Collection (JF 217) Digital image courtesy of the estate of Margaret Mellis. Photo courtesy of Jerwood Collection (all rights reserved)

Researching Margaret Mellis’ still life *Red Flower* (fig. 8) in Sheffield’s collection led me to examine her early works from the 1950s, including one particular image, *Woman and Fish II* (fig. 11). The painting depicts a woman in an apron standing over a series of kitchen objects, including a fish in a frying pan, a plate of sausages, a vase of flowers, and a basket. The woman does not appear to be actively engaged with these items but instead ambivalently presides over them.



Figure 12

Jean Cooke, *Early Portrait of John Bratby, R.A.*, 1954, oil on canvas, 122 × 91.4 cm. Collection of Royal Academy of Arts (03/850) Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts, London (all rights reserved)

It is highly likely that Mellis knew about the “kitchen sink” painters.¹⁶ Her depiction of the domestic scene in *Woman and Fish II* with the use of an awkward perspective (as Bratby often did) and her loose painterly brushwork surely puts this work in proximity to the genre of “kitchen sink” painting—if not as a part of it, then as a later reaction to it. Given that women at work in the home was a common subject in “kitchen sink” painting (unusually, so was depicting babies), it is important that *Woman and Fish II* is marked as an underrepresented interpretation of domestic experience. To make this point, *Woman and Fish II* has been borrowed for the exhibition in Sheffield from the Jerwood Collection and placed near Bratby’s *Jean and Table Top* (fig. 1).

Further research into Bratby’s painting, *Jean and Table Top* in Sheffield’s collection, revealed another story: Bratby’s wife, Jean, who was also a painter, painted interior scenes at the same time as her husband in the 1950s. In a striking work, *Early Portrait of John Bratby* (1954) (fig. 12), Jean painted John with an almost an identical composition to the image he made of her in *Jean and Table Top* earlier that same year—but there are differences. In her work, John appears comfortable at their breakfast table with his legs crossed and the arrangement of two plates implies Jean’s recent company for their meal. It is a far more relaxed and companionable image of domesticity than *Jean and Table Top*, with John presented as an unassuming and casual subject. Greg Salter has speculated that Jean’s depiction undermined how John saw himself according to his many self-portraits. For Salter, John Bratby negotiated his unstable masculinity within paintings of a domestic sphere with which he couldn’t connect. Jean’s painting can be read as a remedial interpretation of John’s unease at home, but also as a powerful reimagining of her husband in the same pose she once assumed in his painting.

Jean and John were known to have a tempestuous relationship with several sources indicating that he physically abused Jean.¹⁷ A close friend of Bratby has suggested that this was due to Jean's artistic success in the early 1950s, before John's career was aligned to "kitchen sink" painting's ascending fame. Jean's painting of John in many ways then seems a riposte to the painting her husband made of her as a dull subject. Bratby once said, "I sometimes painted my wife Jean Cooke as a particular person, not with affection. She was someone to paint".¹⁸ In *Early Portrait of John Bratby*, we see a rare moment in art history, with a corrective visual statement issuing from the objectified artist's muse. Here, Jean assumes authority by placing John into the position he put her in, but softens his affect into a version she chose to present to the viewer. *Jean and Table Top* will be in the Sheffield exhibition side-by-side with a reproduction of Jean's painting of John accompanied by interpretation that compares these two paintings in order to—quite literally—address another perspective of John Bratby's "kitchen sink" domesticity. While the project at Sheffield will continue to undertake research into the collection, the exhibition showcases how working with local groups can impact on collections' research and curatorial practice. By reflecting on the personal and collective themes that materialised during the collaborations, a valuable dialogic process emerged. In the exhibition, this is evident in the interpretation where the groups' comments are prominently displayed on the artworks' labels, showing the diversity of responses generated. A video area in the gallery also features one of the groups of older adults sharing anecdotes in a series of interviews about their memories of home in the post-war period. Adjacent to the video is a display of the social history collection objects that were used to stimulate their recollections. These items also correspond to objects that feature in the works of art in the exhibition, especially in the pop art works, including branded products and domestic appliances. The groups were later invited to the gallery to see all of the different communities' contributions to the exhibition.

This opportunity provided an alternative means for local Sheffield residents who did not typically engage with the museum or fine art to both access the collection in a focused way and to develop a sense of ownership over the cultural landscape of their city. The responses from the groups was overwhelmingly positive in this regard with almost all participants suggesting they would return to the museum again. From an institutional perspective, this collaborative approach proved key in decentring traditional curatorial authority as we developed the exhibition. It also enabled new research into Sheffield's post-war British art collection and new ways of engaging with post-war British art history to showcase the missing stories embedded in its public collections.

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About the author

Abi Shapiro is a curator, writer, and researcher, who specialises in the legacies of art made by women in Western post-war art history. She holds a PhD from McGill University in Canada where her thesis explored the practice and legacy of the American sculptor and installation artist Ree Morton. She has previously worked as Lecturer of Art Histories at City & Guilds of London Art School and as Research Curator: British Art 1945–1975 at Museums Sheffield. She is currently Assistant Curator at The Hepworth Wakefield.

Footnotes

1. David Sylvester first used the term “kitchen sink” painting after seeing John Bratby’s work in 1953. He wrote, “the post war generation takes us back from the studio to the kitchen ... an inventory which includes every kind of food and drink, and even the babies nappies on the line. Everything but the kitchen sink? The kitchen sink too.” David Sylvester, “The Kitchen Sink”, *Encounter*, December 1954.
2. Only two exhibitions considered Peter Coker as a fifth artist in the group. See, Frances Spalding, *The Kitchen Sink Painters* (London: Mayor Gallery in association with Julian Hartnoll, at the Mayor Gallery, March–April 1991, and *The Kitchen Sink Painters: John Bratby, Peter Coker, Derrick Greaves, Edward Middleditch, Jack Smith*, Galerie Michael Haas, Berlin, March–April 1995. Key publications which assume that the group consists only of the four male artists include: James Hyman, *The Battle For Realism: Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War 1945–1960* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) and Lynda Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2017).
3. Tim Hilton said “Was there a link between Kitchen Sink and RCA Pop? I think so.” See Tim Hilton (1988), as quoted by James Hyman in *Derrick Greaves: From Kitchen Sink To Shangri-La* (London: Lund Humphries, 2007), 165.
4. Jean took Bratby’s surname when they were married in 1953 and used his surname on her works of art mostly in the 1950s until reverting to her unmarried name of “Cooke” on her husband’s insistence, so that their work would not be confused. Jean Cooke is the name by which her work is known today. See, Andrew Lambirth, “Jean Cooke: Painter of Wit and Subtlety”, *The Independent*, 11 August 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/jean-cooke-painter-of-wit-and-subtlety-890262.html>.
5. I am indebted to the scholarship of Greg Salter for examining this topic in depth. See Greg Salter, *Domesticity and Masculinity in 1950s British Painting*, unpublished PhD thesis, School of Art History and World Art Studies, University of East Anglia, 2013.
6. Jack Smith, *Ark* [1960] as cited by Nead in *The Tiger in the Smoke*, 368.
7. John Berger, “For the Future”, *New Statesman and Nation*, 19 January 1952, 64.
8. See David Sylvester, “The Kitchen Sink”, *Encounter*, December, 1954.
9. With the exception of John Bratby, the artists changed technique and subject matter after 1956, moving towards more abstract styles (Smith) or pop (Greaves). For a more detailed history of the last few years of the Kitchen Sink artists, see Hyman, *The Battle For Realism*, 178–186.

10. See Salter, *Domesticity and Masculinity in 1950s British Painting*.
11. We are grateful to the residents of Gilbert Court and Applegarth Close and the Guinness Partnership staff for their collaboration on this project.
12. According to the 2011 census, the largest post-war migrant group in Sheffield is the Pakistani community. Sheffield also has large Caribbean, Indian, Bangladeshi, Somali, Yemeni, and Chinese communities. See “Sheffield’s Population”, Sheffield City Council, 2011 Census, <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/home/your-city-council/population-in-sheffield>.
13. For a database of twentieth-century BAME artists’ works of art in UK public collections, see “BAM National Collections Audit”, led by Dr Anjalie Dalal-Clayton, *Black Artists and Modernism*, <http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/black-artists-in-public-collections/>.
14. For just a few examples of this scholarship see, Alexandra Kokoli, *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Angela Dimitrakaki, *Gender, ArtWork and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Global Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2011).
15. For a fuller discussion of the kind of scholarship this approach encompasses, see the Special Issue of *Oxford Art Journal* “Feminist Domesticities”, 40, no. 1 (March 2017) including the “Introduction: Feminist Domesticities”, by Jo Applin and Francesca Berry, “Introduction: Feminist Domesticities”, *Oxford Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (March 2017): 1–5. DOI:10.1093/oxartj/kcx007.
16. Mellis’ husband at the time, Adrian Stokes, was close friends with the critic David Sylvester.
17. For more on this issue, see Salter, *Domesticity and Masculinity in 1950s British Painting*, 57.
18. John Bratby, as quoted by Greg Salter, *Domesticity and Masculinity in 1950s British Painting*, 45.

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