

EXTRACT: KATY BENTHAM

...and painted by the mother of the famous architect.

You can imagine her pulling the arrangement together out of those spare hours of domestic reverie. The image is a telescoping of rooms through shrinking doorways. First the living room, with its yellow wallpaper, where to the right of the composition hang six miniature portraits (nautical). In the foreground is an armchair garishly upholstered in pink and blue florals. The room is lit from the left by a large bay window, excluded from the frame but for the light it gives. A heavy red-wine curtain falls to just kiss the carpet. The detailing around the door frame is robust, like a theatre set, enclosing a dimly lit hallway with a thin shaft of sunlight on the chequered tiles, collapsing again into a slither of distant dining room. A spartan table and a landscape on the back wall, partly obscured by the second door frame.

All you have described is a house but isn't it a portrait of her children?

Yes. In the armchair sits a girl in profile, looking out of the bay window. She's pouting and as stiff as the upholstery, yet her white dress looks soft and yielding. Enclosed by the doorframe, a younger boy. He is wearing a hat like the figures in the portraits. Unlike the detailing of the girl: her rosy cheeks, her button nose, she renders him in thick brushstrokes, a softer focus. She arranges them both in quiet rooms that fold neatly into one another, into softness and security, boredom and unease. It makes you wonder if the buildings he designed are haunted by this childhood, these spectral spaces, these sombre tones? Voices drift through vacant rooms, the walls thick and muted, like dust in a sunbeam.