



INTERIOR ANGLES A REVIEW

by Luke T. Baker

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OPPOSITE: The Milligan House. Activation by Ann Agee. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

For many curators and museum goers alike, period rooms seem like dim and dusty anachronisms: didactic devices frozen in time. Born of a nineteenth-century ethnological impulse to preserve and showcase folk culture within European museums, period rooms must actually remain quite dynamic in order to adopt and reflect ever-emerging developments in material scholarship. An early-American interior depicting a woven carpet on the floor may be altered after new research suggests Colonial settlers preferred to display such a valuable commodity draped over a table instead. Thus, an incidental function of the period room is to act as a snapshot within a snapshot, a document of a moment in historical scholarship and its dated model for how we interpret a moment in history. The self-consciously theatrical quality of these environments renders them ready portals for projection into an experiential fantasy world, one bracketed by discussions of history, identity, and authenticity.

Playing House is a series of installations by four contemporary women artists in eight of the Brooklyn Museum's period rooms that seeks not only to engage visitors with the museum's decorative arts collection, but also to probe these larger questions about the efficacy of understanding the past through material culture. Betty Woodman, Ann Agee, Anne Chu, and Mary Lucier worked with Barry Harwood, Curator of Decorative Arts, and Eugenie Tsai, Curator of Contemporary Art, to consider the existing historical interpretation offered by the period rooms when developing their site-specific installations in ceramics, sculpture, and video. By conspicuously integrating their works into the rooms, each artist offers a different comment on the project of understanding history through material environments.

Anne Chu is a sculptor whose work has used relics of the past (Tang Dynasty tomb figurines, busts, classical sculpture, and medieval stone carvings) as points of departure for her own mythic mixed-media pieces. However, in the Moorish Room of the Worsham-Rockefeller House, Chu brings enlivening color to this Orientalist 1870s smoking room with two works utilizing extremely modern methods of fabrication. In 2008's *Birds of Prey (Vulture)* an outsize sculpture of a pigeon, manufactured from a composite of several drawings plugged into a computerized sewing machine, struts along the carpet toward the viewer. This interloper is dressed sumptuously to match the decor, with a red satin sash draped around its neck. On a central lacquered table, an overscale ceramic vase holds a spray of flowers. The pot is loosely and asymmetrically rendered, glazed with a thin wash of patchwork pigment recalling the bright palettes of Chu's works on paper. Each gaudy, gauzy bloom is created from an arrangement of identical shapes of laser-cut fabric stretched over wire. The overall gestalt is one of disquieting contrast between the liveliness of Chu's additions and the soporific, subdued shades of the smoking room's exotic decor. For another installation in the Russell House parlor from 1772, Chu introduces a second flora and fauna combo. *Landscape with Flowers No. 1* from 2011 resembles a papier-mâché 'volcano' from an elementary school science class, a sloppy, Oldenburgean take on a Tyrolean vista. It and a life-size fabric cardinal, perched atop a welded plinth, occupy the spare interior, whose scant furnishings hug the paneled perimeter. The presence of Chu's egregiously fake flowers and stuffed bird highlight the tensions between living and dead, control and chaos, that haunt reconstructed interior spaces.

Ann Agee's show-stealing installation *Agee MFG Co. Brooklyn Outlet Store* occupies both the Milligan parlor and den, circa 1854 to 1856. Agee has replaced the rooms' Victorian wallpaper with a stage-set backdrop of her own design depicting scenes from an artist's studio: a slop sink, flat files, and cleaning products. The chintzy aesthetic repeats in riotous color and proves a foil to the room's luxurious furnishings. As one peers through the mock-storefront window, it becomes clear that mass pro-

duction is a theme among Agee's other works on display, from the multitude of ceramic "portable bidets" aligned between the rooms, to the cluster of "baby Jell-O molds" (porcelain fetuses under bell jars) on the central table. Arranged on a period sideboard are a number of porcelain vases in cartouche and double-cartouche forms, and although their rough edges and visible seams suggest shoddy, die-cut production, each has been made painstakingly by hand. Most compelling, however, are the artist's reconceptions of porcelain figurine groups. Agee's wares eschew the benign, Boucher-esque vignettes that typify the format for an acrimonious take on contemporary domestic life. In one scene, a hastily modeled figure of a woman at a sewing machine is jostled at her workspace by a rambunctious child on a skateboard behind her, while in another, a family group stands poised together with protest signs in hand, as if banded in solidarity at a rally. Never one to shy away from the salacious, Agee has placed a jar of ceramic phallic forms (the coquettish label: "please ask for assistance") symbolically next to a jar of earthenware rings. Part domestic environment, part atelier, part commercial space, Agee's installation champions the quotidian and mass-produced as valuable artifacts of visual and material culture, but most poignant is the capacity of her work to both celebrate and deconstruct the subjective, personal experience of contemporary domestic life. This isn't your grandma's definition of the decorative arts, or your mother's either, for that matter. Agee radicalizes craft – the process and the product that results – to charge it with her own witty politics of gender, of art world legitimacy, to, quite literally, recast not just the forms but also the way we receive them.

In Brooklyn's Nicholas Schenk Houses, video and installation artist Mary Lucier stages her 2012 series *Genealogy: The Dutch Connection*, somber interventions that mine her cultural heritage and examine methodologies of historic interpretation. A descendant of Sarah Rapelje, the first female European child born in New Netherland, Lucier tracks her family lineage through history and objects, from the sixteenth-century exodus of Dutch and French Huguenots to the New World, to the Rapelje family of present-day Long Island. An edit of D.W. Griffith's 1916 film *Intolerance* chronicling the St. Bartholemew's Day Huguenot massacre and a digital slide show, *Rapelje Timeline*, lend necessary historical context to Lucier's works. In *Sarah's Chair*, a video mounted amid a display of Brooklyn's seventeenth-century chairs, Lucier confronts her ancestor via an object that once belonged to her. She animates the chair through rapid stop-motion, rotating the object through portrait and profile poses as though it were vested with the spirit of its former owner. In the video piece *Still Life #1*, actors in period costume ceremoniously arrange and then disassemble a feast worthy of a Dutch still life on the table of the eighteenth-century house. They act as devout ancestor worshipers leaving offerings for the dead. *Still Life #2* in the North Room of the Schenk House is an installation that functions as a three-dimensional vanitas: the remnants of a feast are spread atop the table, along with spilled wine, temporal flowers and fruits, a skull. In four rooms in the museum's newer, nineteenth-century Schenk House, Lucier's works draw parallels between historic re-creations and cultural identity, both cobbled together from disparate sources to form a whole. Addressing the ethnological function of the period room, family portraits – metaphorical ghosts of the home's former inhabitants – imbue the rooms with a human presence and stare back out of the environment to meet the viewer's curious gaze.

Celebrity ceramicist Betty Woodman was the original artist chosen for *Playing House*, and with good reason. Her postmodern pastiche of ceramic archetypes is the perfect *agent provocateur* for installation concepts such as this. At the Brooklyn Museum, Woodman's exuberant, parti-color cups, centerpieces, saucers, and vases,



ABOVE: Schenck House. Activation by Mary Lucier. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

along with exquisitely simple glass vessels with flattened, shrimplike handles, are the surprise guests at the table in the Cupola House's Jacobean dining room. In the adjoining pantry, period tablewares in dull pewter almost sulk on their shelves by comparison. In the Cane Acres Plantation dining room from 1806, Woodman and Chu work in concert to embellish an architecturally austere canvas. Woodman's nonfunctional dinner service features drinking vessels in planar silhouette and gestural porcelain swirls for plates. Along the sideboard, a row of vases with phony amphoralike facades recall the historical irreverence of playful chair designs by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Woodman further deconstructs notions of the decorative in her *Green Border, Blue Rug; Clay Bones, Green Rug; and Turkish Carpet, Five Ceramic Carpet*, whose blocky, bisque abstractions refuse to lie passive and flush on the fabric. Chu's arrangements of flowers indigenous to the clime of the house's original setting merge in symbiosis with Woodman's wall vases and sensuously streamlined centerpiece.

Interspersing contemporary art among older works and manipulating museum collections are hardly new ideas. Fred Wilson has been performing museological "interventions" since the 1990s, while Yinka Shonibare incorporated his work into a period room at the Newark Museum in 2009, and Woodman and Agee participated in a presaging exhibition melding ceramics with historic interiors for 2010's "Interactions in Clay" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

As a decorative arts devotee and maven of material culture, I am wary of any arts institution that feels a need to activate its presentation of decorative arts for a mercurial audience with thrill-a-minute curatorial gimmicks. Such was my initial concern with the concept of *Playing House*, and it remains a potential miscommunication for a casual viewer breezing through the galleries. Of course, utilizing contemporary decorative arts objects as catalysts for rethinking the interpretation of decorative arts objects is a laudatory act, one that acknowledges the transformative capacity of the palpable and familiar. The more cerebral critiques of historical interpretation levied by the Brooklyn Museum's installation series are subtle, nestled within

artist statements and didactic texts, their nuance liable to be lost amid the jarring formal effect of the juxtapositions. Chu's contribution falls short of the visual and critical standard set by the other participating artists, for example, and the old-meets-new concept driving her juxtapositions is reduced to its limited formal effect. However, it is by conspicuously cracking the facade of historical accuracy with incongruous pairings that these artists' activations in "conceptual craft" break through the fourth wall of the historic rooms to call out the fissures between objects and the reality they purport to present. In an unexpected and celebratory twist, these artists revel in the space between, and their installations entice viewers to participate in an additive range of possibilities: alternate histories, identity politics, and formal pairings engendered by this act of playing house.



ABOVE: Moorish Smoking Room. Activation by Anne Chu. Photographs courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

OPPOSITE: The Cupola House Hall. Activation by Betty Woodman.

