

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

**Gill Perry, 'Art that hits close to home', *The Art Newspaper*, June 19, 2014**

An exploration of the house in contemporary practice

That the home is an extension of the self is a truism familiar to a generation whose student years coincided with a boom in daytime television programmes on the subject of interior decoration. Those series shared the schedules with dulcet-toned pop psychiatrists who took great care to remind their viewers that the human self was a divided one, that we do not know ourselves.

A logical conclusion based on these founding principles of our individualistic, consumerist age is that the idea of “home” is a conflicted one: part sanctuary, part storehouse for our darkest instincts, fears and traumas. Sigmund Freud described the German word heimlich (“homely”) as denoting “on the one hand... what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight”. When the latter displaces the former, the comfortable notion of home is subverted and disrupted. The word “domestic” is equally familiar as a prefix to bliss and abuse.

Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art presents the incorporation of the physical architectures of the house into recent art practice as symptomatic of this ambiguity. The house or home has become a familiar trope of installation art, from London-born Michael Landy’s full-scale reconstruction of his childhood home, *Semi-detached*, 2004, in Tate Britain, to Korean artist Do Ho Suh’s crashed houses.

Artists, like all of us, vacillate between a yearning for the safety of home—a sanctuary, we feel its loss more deeply in a globalised society—and the urge to expose its terrors, to liberate the madwoman from the attic and the skeletons from the closet. *Playing at Home* surveys the myriad roles that the idea of home have served when incorporated into art made since the 1960s.

Gill Perry’s particular angle on the theme is the centrality of “play” to the production and criticism of contemporary art. “Playing” here is posited as “essential to creativity and the search for the self in both child and adult”, an open-ended exercise that can include humour, subversion and paradox. By playing with preconceived ideas of home—by splitting a house in two, in the case of Gordon Matta-Clark in *Splitting*, 1974; by exploding a shed, as Cornelia Parker did with *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, 1991; or, like Simon Starling, by turning a shed into a boat and back again in *Shedboatshed*, 2005—the artist is able to make us think again about the physical edifices that we live in as “the spaces through which modern social, gendered and familial cultures are expressed”, and through which, therefore, they can be challenged.

This aspect of Perry’s investigation finds its strongest expression in a chapter devoted to miniaturisation. Speaking of the doll’s house, she says that “its function as a ‘toy’ enables the child to play-act, to pursue transgressive desires in, for example, the unconventional rearrangement of rooms, displacement of furniture, or restaging of family relationships and conflicts”. This strikes me as a rather neat formulation for the practice of art itself. By rearranging the world, artists such as Louise Bourgeois alert us to what is hidden in plain view.

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A practical example of the means by which creative practice can ask us to reconsider the idea of house and home is provided by Detroit's Heidelberg Project. It began in 1986 as a means of drawing attention to the neglected streets in the city's crumbling suburbia by decorating abandoned houses in lurid colours and affixing reclaimed junk to the facades. Perry claims that these houses, which have been transformed into colourful, irreverent symbols of collective creativity, "position art practice as both playful and serious".

As Freud said, "the opposite of play is not what is serious, but what is real". "Playing" here makes us aware of the way that the world of "real" action, of political will and social organisation, is failing to address our concerns over the notion of home (and homeland). For his work *Seizure*, 2008, 2013, the artist Roger Hiorns transformed a condemned south London flat into a sparkling crystalline grotto, which served a similar purpose. The home in these cases extends beyond the personal to become an "ongoing focus of social and political struggle".

All of which might sound like rather heavy-going. In fact, despite a slightly plodding introduction and the occasional tendency to use pre-existing theories as a safety net rather than a searchlight, Perry has written a scholarly, readable and timely survey of an important theme. This book reminds us of the capacity of art to deepen our understanding of a contested, contentious concept whose centrality to the way we live today will not have escaped anyone living in Europe during the recent elections.

Playing at Home: The House in Contemporary Art, Reaktion Books, 264pp, £17.95 (pb)

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