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KELLY LYCAN'S THE FIREPLACE

WHEN I WAS A STUDENT in London in the early 2000s, I visited 2 Willow Road, a house designed by the modernist architect Ernő Goldfinger in 1939. I was so entranced by this house on that first visit that I became a volunteer tour guide. Goldfinger and his family lived in the house until the late 1980s, after which it became a National Trust property and museum. Visitors are invited to move through the rooms of the house, with guides positioned throughout to answer any questions. I spent as much time as possible in the dining room, where a collage by Roland Penrose hangs on one wall adjunct to the dining table, the legs of which is a machine tool base. This relationship between artwork and object was one of many exquisite adjacencies found in 2 Willow Road. This house fulfilled fantasies of the interwar period and a soft, lived-in modernity, where a rotoscope by Marcel Duchamp is displayed with the same reverence as a container of wooden kitchen implements. The allure of 2 Willow Road derives partly from the temporal condition of the house, left in the same state in which the Goldfingers had lived in it until their deaths. This sense of time on pause is typical of historical homes that have become museums, where a specific era in the history of the house is chosen by curators as the era to be presented to the public. The Goldfingers' house is unique in that they never moved out, and no one else ever moved in; the furniture and artwork are for the most part where they left them. Nothing had to be recreated, no set dressing was required to conjure an authentic staging of the era and their lives. Visiting feels like coming to water the plants of a neighbour while they are on holiday.

During my tour guide years, I was invited to the annual volunteer holiday party, which was hosted in the house. Having only ever been there in the afternoon, among the few but dedicated tourists, arriving in the evening was thrilling. I heard music and the loud chatter of guests inside, their warm bodies producing condensation that ran down the glass windows facing the street. Had I not been invited and only happened to be passing the house that evening, I would have been shocked to see such domestic conviviality lighting up the house which hitherto I had only experienced as a sanctified museum. Without skipping a beat, this museum was all of a sudden a house again.

Standing there on the street, I had a profound sense of collapsed time, of being in a multitude of eras at once. I knew everyone inside, but for a brief moment they were apparitions from a previous era, conjured by the house itself.

Out here, on the southern coast of so-called British Columbia, seldom is our built environment put on pause or repurposed. Electric moments of collapsed time are rare here. Entire city blocks get demolished and rebuilt at an unfathomable pace. These erasures cause street-level confusion, when the vernacular familiarity of wood cladding and stucco is replaced with an unvaried and homogenous glass and concrete of entire new city blocks or infill condos. This process of gentrification is not new, but rather cyclical. It echoes the element of horror found in early photographs of Vancouver, where bald hills sprout newly built Victorian homes, surrounded by muddy fields in all directions.<sup>1</sup> Because Vancouver is forever trapped in this colonial and capitalist pathology of razing, much of our knowledge and understanding of the built environments of this place exists between photographic evidence and what remains at street level, what we can still walk inside. The building that houses the Burnaby Art Gallery gives us both. It stands in blunt contrast to these cycles of razing.<sup>2</sup> Despite traversing a wide spectrum of use over the course of a century, it appears deceptively taciturn from the outside. Its character represents the spiralling out of architectural styles of the British Empire, an Edwardian mansion with Arts and Crafts aspirations, where local fir was stained to look like mahogany, while fireplace tiles were imported from Medmenham Pottery in the UK. Having shifted from its house-ness to gallery-ness in 1967, a miasmic quality remains from its many uses: strawberry farm turned country retreat turned Benedictine Abbey turned Temple of the More Abundant Life turned frat house turned gallery. The holding of this history is what the timber and stucco of the

<sup>1</sup> In a text exchange with Kelly, I sent her a picture from the City of Vancouver Archives of a house that Henry Ceperley had once lived in. Kelly remarked that it was as though someone had "planted a house seed from another land and it grew, an invasive species."

<sup>2</sup> The Western Front, Chinese Canadian Museum, Vancouver Art Gallery, and former Presentation House Gallery come to mind as art spaces that maintained the character of their previous uses.

house is doing, while the photographs documenting life at the house hold the picnics and prayers. Persistent apparitions appear and move between the material and the photographic, opening up spaces and wavelengths that Kelly Lycan has tuned into for her exhibition *The Fireplace*.

Lycan is an artist who examines images to make sculptures and installations and along the way she blurs any distinction between these modes. Her approach is porous; she works with materials, objects, and images that have previously cycled through structures of use unrelated to art. She is a gleaner of atmospheres. There is no conventional hierarchy to what gets brought to the studio, where the lowliest piece of stretchy green plastic can become the last light of the day passing through aquamarine glass flickering on a wall. In *The Fireplace* she has also used the gallery as a material, the building and all it contains become pliable in her hands, a material like any other she has captured and stored for reanimation. Lycan has named the works in this exhibition following the same format, each ringing out with its definite article, pointing to what is in front of us, in this gallery, at this time:

*The Roof*  
*The Bathtub*  
*The Umbrella*  
*The Cups*  
*The Picnic*  
*The Plugs*  
*The Sign*  
*The Stool*  
*The Wallpaper*  
*The Atmosphere*  
*The Roost*  
*The Decorations*

*The Storage Unit*  
*The Set Dressing Photo Collection*  
*The Auction*  
*The Curtain*  
*The Necklace*  
*The Blankets*  
*The Stove*  
*The Take-Out Swan*  
*The Bathroom*  
*The Fish Tank*  
*The Mountains*

As much as she has arranged these works inside the rooms of the gallery, Lycan has conjured much of what these rooms used to be and what they may have held.

In Lycan's *The Wallpaper*, materials that have reached the end of their intended use—of wrapping gifts, carrying shopping or protecting delicate surfaces—have been unfolded and layered into a wallpaper, illuminated by a stand of ring lights. These layers occasionally lift off the walls, fluttering in a breeze created by a small group of portable fans. Cut-out silhouettes of houseplants appear among these layers in a fragmented allusion to the iconic wallpapers of William Morris. While Morris' patterns rendered plants and birds and garden motifs into dense and tightly wrought repetitions, Lycan's wallpaper is the opposite: it's precarious and familiar. Lycan's conception of nature here is the houseplants that keep us company in our homes. Photographs comprise the top layer of her wallpaper; arranged in groups, they pin down the fluttering and glittering surfaces below them. These photographs are selected from a collection that Lycan has kept for nearly 20 years, from when she worked in the film industry in Vancouver as a set decorator.<sup>3</sup> They

<sup>3</sup> The remaining photographs from *The Set Dressing Photo Collection* are displayed as part of *The Fireplace* in the Fireside Room at the Burnaby Art Gallery.

4 It is likely that I processed some of these photographs myself. Around the same time that Lycan was working in the film industry, I was working in a lab that processed photographs for set decorators and location scouts working in the Vancouver film industry. Sitting at a Fuji processing machine, I printed these photos as fast as I could, doing zero correction. I quickly packed each roll, hot from the printer, into envelopes, producing hundreds a day, just like the ones Lycan has used in *The Wallpaper*.

were taken by Lycan and her colleagues when informally shot and quickly printed four-by-six-inch colour prints were the main form of communication for set decorators and production designers.<sup>4</sup> Shot in and around prop houses in Burnaby with no artistic intention, the objects in these photographs are isolated. Unpacked after many years in storage, these photographs arrive to Lycan as artistic material. Couches, curtains, ashtrays, fake plants—a wide range of accoutrements of decor. Out of context, in these photographs, each entity seems caught off guard, waiting to be used to decorate the imagined worlds of film and television. These images, humble and luxurious, inform Lycan's thinking about the inextricable ways that our quotidian realities and imagined worlds fold into one another through the objects that make up the structures of domestic life. Lycan pins down this thinking by finding the resonances between photographic depictions and the worn-out yet glittering layers of transparent material. In one instance, Lycan has matched the surface of a piece of mylar with a photograph of four glass ashtrays, finding a magnetic charge between the wavering surface of the glass, the emulsion of the photograph, and the surface of the mylar. These charges flicker across the entirety of *The Wallpaper*, producing a set dressing of atmosphere instead of place.

Lycan's *The Roof* is made of cardboard, shingled and painted a muddy pink, pushing out of the gallery floor. This roof appears to be fabricated based on a remembered description, rather than a blueprint, of a shingled roof. The roof is the same colour as a kitchen wall in Lycan's house, as she has used leftover paint from her domestic space to coat the roof. This colour, named Old Country, may have been inspired by the bathroom colours popular in the 1930s and '40s, a colour similar to a small pink cast iron model bathtub that sits on top of the roof. This tiny tub is held aloft by the roof, which serves as

a plinth for three other components. Atop this roof, Lycan again considers the magnetic charge between things: a stack of plastic cups, iridescent and coffee-coloured from a thin coating of leftover resin, teeter upwards in a gentle arch. Similarly pointing upwards: a crucifix-shaped post is topped with a flattened umbrella, celadon with pink edging, that has been stripped from its metal armature and coated in resin. This wonky satellite dish and its repurposed crucifix are beaming in the knowledge that this room was once the site of the altar of the order of Benedictine monks who worshipped and lived here. A black-and-white photograph lays prone on the roof, depicting a slightly haughty but disheveled picnic scene from the era of the Ceperleys, the couple who commissioned and first inhabited the house in 1911. This image depicts a dining table that has been dragged out to the orchard that was once adjacent to the gallery. Cushions lie on the grass and the table is piled high with dishes, napkins and a frilly tea cozy. It is easy to imagine the heavy table sinking into the soft green grass and the dampness absorbed by the pillows on the ground. The politesse of the inside is brought outside in a reversal of the Arts and Crafts philosophy of bringing the outside in.<sup>5</sup> In this image, Lycan has cut out the human presence and made the background the subject. She's made the image a portrait of two apple trees, unwashed dishes, and spring. All that *The Fireplace* contains is oscillating between the outside inside and the inside outside. In Lycan's own exquisite adjacency, across the gallery from *The Roof* is a cardboard sign: *FREE RaspBerry Plant*. Somehow this scrawl expresses a tenderness required for the care of plants that is too much a sign of life, too human to be discarded.

For Lycan, every aspect of domestic space, material or otherwise, contains the possibility of an idea. Unconcerned with hierarchy, in her work *The Stove*, Lycan has approached the gallery's HVAC system and radiators with the same reverence as she has the Arts and Crafts fireplace that is located in the upstairs gallery, in what was originally the primary bedroom. To these sources of

5 Lisa Robertson's "Arts and Crafts in Burnaby: A Congenial Soil," in *Collapse #5, Rhetorics of Utopia: Early Modernism and the Canadian West Coast*, provides a detailed history of the Arts and Crafts movement in direct relation to the Ceperley House, which is now the Burnaby Art Gallery.

heat and warmth Lycan has added an imagined fourth source: a replica of a small coal-burning stove with a sculpted pipe placed in relation to the existing HVAC system. Lycan considers everything in this room to be useful for thinking about sculpture, the presence of the HVAC here is not a cursed incursion of building infrastructure but rather an already present material she can work with. *The Stove* is another sculpture that Lycan has extruded from a photograph, in this case, an image of Emily Carr's studio in Victoria, from around 1945. This photograph is dense with the contents of the work and life of an artist, it is easy to imagine the pull of warmth such a stove would have in our particularly damp climate. Stoves exude an aura of heat that invites proximity; our bodies want to be close to them. Especially to the type of stove in Carr's studio, where the flame is not visible, its heat all practical without the flicker of an open flame. Stoves need tending, their temperatures rise and fall according to the attention given by the person who is stoking them. *The Stove* is a stand-in for all that attentiveness, a stand-in for the artist. By installing her work adjacent to the original Arts and Crafts fireplace of this former bedroom, Lycan is pointing at the economic difference between a fireplace and a stove. The original fireplace in the room was there to provide heat as well as aesthetic pleasure, via its glazed tiles and mantel. Stoves, meanwhile, are more concerned with survival, nothing goes to waste. Fittingly, Lycan has topped the stove with a tinfoil swan, mimicking those that restaurant leftovers used to be packed in. The swan, in all its twinkly crinkle, conjures not only a lukewarm repast but also coal dust and embers, of oxygen bringing fire back to life and warming a room. The directed exhale of an artist's breath, a sign of life.

Just to the right of the stove, Lycan has made a seemingly small gesture: she has unlocked and left open a door—leading to a bathroom—that has previously always been kept shut, hanging a thin rope across the entrance. Although Lycan has put no art in this room, the rope she has installed delicately asks the viewer to not enter the bathroom. With this limited vista, the room registers visually like a photograph. Beyond the chain is an imperfect fragment of an Edwardian bathroom, replete with high ceilings,

fitted cupboards, and octagonal tiles laid in a pattern of white and chalky blue. Despite all evidence indicating that the bathroom has not been used in some time, this view provided by Lycan elicits a sudden and unexpected privilege. The proximity of this bodily intimacy—bathrooms are, after all, where we undress and bathe—to the activity of viewing art produces a disarming concurrence. Lycan makes us aware that this bathroom has quietly been on pause while many of the rooms around it have been devoted to exhibition-making. This opening of the bathroom raises our awareness of other architectural capsules that may be adjunct to our viewing and what else is happening at the same time as our contemplation of her work. Lycan's gesture produces an embodied simultaneity that is not only comprised of all the epochs of this house-turned-gallery, but also the structures of life that unfolded within it.

Such a gesture is explicit but also gentle; she is articulating that moments of simultaneity are not in fact rare and exclusive to this context, they are happening all the time. And they are not just happening in space, they are happening in layers of material and in objects that get used, discarded, and picked up again. That's one of the many things that Lycan's work tells us; every object, material, and space is gilded with an ever-growing patina formed by its persistent existence. In this way, Lycan is the ideal artist to create an exhibition in a gallery that was originally a home with high-minded Arts and Crafts ideals. Those Arts and Crafts aspirations were lived in with reverence and also bashed around and renovated. Brass hinges of doors were thickly painted over and windows were covered up. Lycan's work reveres these thick accumulations, perceptible or imagined. Lycan asks us to sense those layers, to be attuned to their tenderness, and to the knowledge that the evidence of time does not get sloughed off or removed, it piles up.

