

THE FIREPLACE

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Do you ever get exhausted by the world of things? In my house, there are so many objects. They feel like guests coming and going, causing disruption as they vibrate and stir. A formerly prized possession is removed from the mantel and replaced by a new object of fascination. A worn and faded chair falls out of favour and is gently ushered out. A salt container is empty but not recyclable, and even the glass must go in the trash. There's a weight to all these things, to how they are worshipped and wasted, as if the makers and those who cared for a thing somehow accompany each one, packed tightly inside.

Kelly Lycan's exhibition, *The Fireplace*, contemplates the whole of the Burnaby Art Gallery, located inside the Ceperley House, as a staged set, with its features, former uses, and occupancies as points of fixation. Structural elements of the house are pulled into the foreground, highlighting its character, acting as the earring or chipped nail polish might on a body. Lycan unearths the presence of former residents through small slivers of the things they once held near. She renders past images as objects, giving dimension to scenarios and lives and entwining us into the lifecycle of things. Contemporary art furnishes the house, and absence points to a shimmering presence.

I've heard gallery visitors say, "Imagine sleeping in this house," as they walk through its rooms. This is (home) staging for a place that has disavowed furniture, in a place to look at art. For gallery staff, while emails are composed, papers filed, entries made in databases, a shadow of former use always lingers. The buffet cabinets, originally intended for dishes and silverware, are stuffed with cards and pamphlets; a modern water cooler is tucked away where a wood-burning cooking stove once sat; a desk stands where a bed or a claw-foot tub would have been. Entire walls of built-in cabinets have been covered over with false walls. So much change, and yet nothing is irreversible.

Much of Lycan's work has centred on reproduced interiors based on photographs. For her 2014 installation, *Underglow*, at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver, she staged a full-size replica of 291, a gallery in New York, based on a black-and-white installation photograph of the space. The work provoked an unsettling experience of moving around within the entirely greyscale interior of a photograph. That same year, she presented *Autobiography for No One* at SFU Galleries in Burnaby. In a nearly all-white, monochromatic installation space resembling an artist's studio, Lycan's work and exhibition title seemed to reference the stoic blankness of capital-A Art, a separation between the object and human inhabitant within the space and offer an invitation to contemplate form stripped of colour. Marina Roy wrote of the untethered quality of the exhibition, in which the work seemed to have been "divorced from any provenance or property."¹ Within this exhibition, Lycan reproduced Delacroix's stove; a sturdy and heroic presence—an embodiment of the artist as a whitewashed effigy, yet still producing an aura of warmth.

Lycan's work *The Wallpaper* covers the walls of the Ceperley House's former dining room, speculated to once have been furnished with curtains from William Morris' well-known Arts and Crafts textile, "The Strawberry Thief."² Lycan's wallpaper is composed of repurposed mylar, fabric, scenic lighting gels, tissue paper, plastic packaging, garbage, and resin. Interspersed within the wallpaper are four-by-six-inch photographs of furniture for set dressing, objects once used to create a *mise en scène* for film. This iridescent installation references the mode of Zoom-space we have adapted to over the past several years; a world of screens linking us to others' personal spaces: their bedrooms, offices, time zones, and realities. The intimacy of this installation is accentuated through ring lights that warmly illuminate both the visitor and the work.

¹ Marina Roy, "Kelly Lycan," *Canadian Art*, Winter 2015, pg. 145.

² Lisa Robertson, "Arts and Crafts in Burnaby: A Congenial Soil" in *Collapse #5, Rhetorics of Utopia: Early Modernism and the Canadian West Coast*, ed. Grant Arnold (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Forum Society, 2000), pg. 27.

As caretakers of the house (and the gallery), we've inherited stories, some of which come from written text and some of which are oral and speculative. Many of which are reconstructed fragments that we piece together in an attempt to build a body of knowledge about this place. Tension lies in the reconfiguration and repurposing of the space and the telling (and re-telling) of stories. Occasionally we have been visited by former inhabitants of this place—the Benedictines, the “cult members,” the descendants of the Ceperleys, delivering fragments that often contradict what has been accrued and what is written.

Lycan's 2018 exhibition, *Approximations, Rasht 29* (at the Ag Galerie, Tehran, Iran's first artist-run space), reimagined elements from archival photographs, creating a theatre-like setting for the production of talks, workshops, and performances.³ Through motifs of stained glass and the curvature of alcoves, Lycan channeled elements of the space as it existed from 1967 to 1970 and merged it with its contemporary art activities.

In total, there are six fireplaces in this house. There is a grand fireplace in each gallery and an enormous one set into the inglenook of the former billiards room. A fireplace signals warmth and intimacy, it is the heart of the home; people gather around the hearth. The outside comes in, and the burning of wood sustains and warms the body. It can also symbolize destruction, as a place to burn cards, letters, journals, and photographs. The artist must enter into an agreement with the fireplace here—the space is to be shared.

Lycan reminds us that the stove is a stand-in for the artist. Of the stove-depicting artists that might come to mind: Eugène Delacroix, Paul Cézanne, Alexander Colville, Sterling Ruby, Lycan has chosen to represent a replica of Emily Carr's stove: one that was moved from place to place and eventually sat in her studio space and bedroom at Alexander Street in Victoria, warming her as she painted or slept. The archival photo-

graph reference shows the stout barrel and bent pipe of her stove, seemingly retrofitted into a space that had held a working fireplace. The room is cramped with furniture, a jumble of lamps and a work-in-progress painting of totem poles directly next to the small cot where she worked in her last years.

Carr's 1940 journal entries give occasional tribute to the comfort of her stove: “We came back to 218 St. Andrews to find the great glutton of a fireplace cleared out and my little old stove giving the whole place a fine heat. It was a great relief for I was anxious about the cold of the flat and how I was going to make do.”⁴ This reference to Carr, her work, and her studio situation highlights the material realities of being an artist—bound to the difficulty of keeping warm in drafty spaces (the contemporary version of the stove might be the ubiquitous presence of the space heater in an artist's studio).

Lycan has carefully integrated the work by “piping” this stove into the existing HVAC system of the gallery, reimagining the former primary bedroom as a studio space.

The photo album with pictures removed, as it might be encountered in a thrift shop, an object shifted from treasure, something that in the past you'd consider saving from a house fire, now an item of abjection. The empty album retains an energetic charge of loss, like an empty home waiting for new inhabitants. I'm reminded of the subtle cues that indicate home staging for real estate listings, how even with furniture the houses look empty: set dressing for imagined people and lives.

At the turn of our current century, thing theory—thinking of objects as social actors—became popular in academia. The anthropologist Severin Fowles has written about the so-called blind spot of thing theory:

³ This exhibition was curated by Elham Puriya Mehr and included works by Kelly Lycan, Derya Akay, Vedad Famour Zadeh, Reza Haeri, Sohrab Kashani, and Natalie Purschwitz.

⁴ Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands: The Journals of Emily Carr* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Company Limited, 1966), pg. 319.

My worry is that this new materialism tends to blind us to that more complicated world of relations in which, packed between the multitudes of self-evident things, are crowds of non-things, negative spaces, lost or forsaken objects, voids or gaps—absences, in other words, that also stand before us as entity-like presences with which we must contend.⁵

Here, the power of the thing itself might be made stronger through its absence. Fowles writes further on the loss of an object, with the example of a set of missing keys:

Consider the keys that have been misplaced and so are present only as an absence. These absent keys also impinge upon us in a strongly sensuous fashion: one registers the absence of keys with distress, gropes about the emptiness in one's pocket, and, defeated, is left standing in the cold outside one's apartment. Both the keys and the absence of the keys have material effects on the world.⁶

It is within these gaps that Lycan works, heightening the power of voids and interstices as places of special meaning. Her "objects in waiting" attune us to the perpetual reconfiguration of not only this place, but all places. No place sits still.

There has been the enormous work of sifting through thousands of set dressing photographs, along with the ordering, not the type of photo-sifting you might take on with personal photos. Bins full of hands that point at objects for scale, bins full of lamp

upon lamp, evidence of a categorical eye. Bedspreads from almost every decade are displayed in plastic tubs, as if being prepared for storage, or having just been unearthed. It's the material manifestation of a catalogue of interiors.

It's as if the rich melancholy of sifting and sorting through things has seeped up from the basement to the main floors and dispersed, and the objects, removed from their cycle of use, have been untethered from a lifetime of regular and careless wear. The relationships that brought them into being and escorted them through time to us are made faintly visible. Lycan's interventions are both a part of the space and apart from it, mirroring the fleeting and transient flickers of relationships we might have with people, with homes, as temporary guests of places with immense histories.

⁵ Severin Fowles, "People Without Things," *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss* (New York: Springer, 2010), pg. 25.

⁶ Severin Fowles, "People Without Things."

