

Taxidermy sex meets soft- paste porcelain

Crossovers

Pallant House Gallery, Chichester PO19 1TJ
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Reviewed by Professor Simon Olding

Pallant House Gallery announced its interest in installation right at the moment of re-opening: Susie MacMurray's luxuriant work *Shell* dressed the staircase of the Queen Anne house: a commanding demonstration of purpose. Here was a heritage building fit for contemporary art – neither the old building nor the new extension was going to stand preserved and unchanging.

This approach has been richly and entertainingly developed in *Contemporary Eye: Crossovers*, a complex and rewarding exhibition curated by Artwise Curators (Susie Allen, Laura Culpan and Deana Vanagan) with verve, an eye for the unexpected, and a fine sensitivity to space. In the Queen Anne house an array of contemporary works – drawn from private art collections – take possession of their surroundings, challenging, and sometimes even offering a provocation to the orthodoxy of looking at heritage. There is a gothic thrill for example, in discovering a hare, improbably antlered, mounting an unfazed chicken on the ground floor of the house (Artists Anonymous, *Untitled Hare and Chicken*).

We move from taxidermy sex to an exploded soft-paste porcelain figure – a conservator's reassemblage, perhaps, where the conventional *blanc de chine* figure found in a thousand historic house museums is reinvigorated in destruction by Bouke de Vries. Here the perfect, shiny skill of the unnamed craft modeller has been re-imagined, not as a means of closure and finish, but as the starting place for an iconoclastic experimentation. This is an ordered, mannered chaos.

Elegant discomfiture attends other installations throughout these heritage rooms: Mona Hatoum's glass hand grenades in the midst of an 18th century Irish glass collection, for example. These interplays have wit and purpose: they cause us to question the familiarity of what we expect to see. Though the methodology is not unique – other historic sites, such as Pitshanger Manor or Belsay Hall, have been deploying installations – Pallant House has



assembled an impressive sequence.

But what makes this exhibition original is the role-reversal taking place in three rooms in the museum extension, a crescendo that adds to the show's depth and reach. In these galleries, historic works from the collection now counterpoint with selected private contemporary pieces: the new converses with the old, a mirror to the placements in the Queen Anne house.

Within these newly dressed rooms there are still moments of grace as well as disquiet. An elegant 18th century sidetable, once host no doubt to the occasional 18th century Irish glass of claret, now frames Kelly McCallum's macabre line of stuffed pigeons, a writhing golden mass of maggots at the breast of one; a seed pearl heart at another. Two replica 'town house rooms' sit on either side of a conventional white cube gallery. In this space, an array of craft and sculpture is displayed with mathematical poise, including the serene ranks of a porcelain grouping by Edmund de Waal.

The exhibition aims to 'explore artistic process, with a specific focus on fine artists who incorporate elements of a traditional "craft" approaches in their practice.' It hits this mark well, but I think it does another job even better. It informs us about the dynamic, restless spirit of an art place, where installation has become a sensitive and respectful (not to mention gothic and subversive) strategy of curatorship to connect the past and the present. This is an outstanding exhibition from a public gallery on top of its form. Professor Simon Olding is director of the Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts