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REVIEWS

A Hatchet to Kill Old Ugly: Joy Feasley and Paul Swenbeck

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In Moyra Davey's *Burn the Diaries*, her current exhibition at the University of Pennsylvania ICA and a deep meditation on the acts of reading, writing, and photography, the artist quotes from French activist and writer Jean Genet: "[E]very person takes his nourishment from everything. He isn't transformed by reading a book, looking at a painting, or hearing a piece of music; he is transformed gradually, and from all these things he makes something that suits him." In a similar vein, Joy Feasley and Paul Swenbeck place their pieces and an array of man-made and natural objects within an austere, Shaker aesthetic to express a totality of inspiration that is beyond any single work. *A Hatchet to Kill Old Ugly*, the artists' current installation at the Fabric Workshop, activates a connective journey between their mystic-contemporary aesthetic and its origins within a dynamic, immersive space.



Installation view, Fabric Workshop and Museum

Within the 1222 Arch Street gallery, removed from the main FWM building, the installation feels like a period room gently redecorated for a contemporary inhabitant. The thoroughly accurate Shaker-style living area, complete with furniture and tools for home use, is augmented by the presence of molded plastic nightlights, shining from historically inappropriate outlets. Collections of sculptures and minutiae are gathered incongruously on different surfaces – neon-pink figures hulk on top of a woodpile, spiny, ceramic, flower-like sculptures line the window of the gallery – and traditional mirror hangers are occupied by dreamlike Day-glo paintings. A mirrored, illusionist composition hangs above the fireplace near a black antler and a strange geometric object. Crawling through the fireplace reveals an entire universe of reflected projections and holograms in a small, cave-like space. The fireplace portal activates on entry with clanging bells, gentle mechanized whirring, and spinning lights. Perhaps the space has been reimagined to facilitate an acid trip, or a spiritual seeker.

Whoever the intended future inhabitant of the space is, the unifying element behind *Hatchet* is the artists' deep fascination with the psycho-sensory experimentation of human culture, particularly as seen through traditional Shaker craft. It also demonstrates a fascination with the impressionistic, narrative power of museum preparation, a field that both artists are employed in. The fifth collaborative installation by Swenbeck (a ceramicist) and Feasley (a painter/installation artist) speaks to a diverse log of

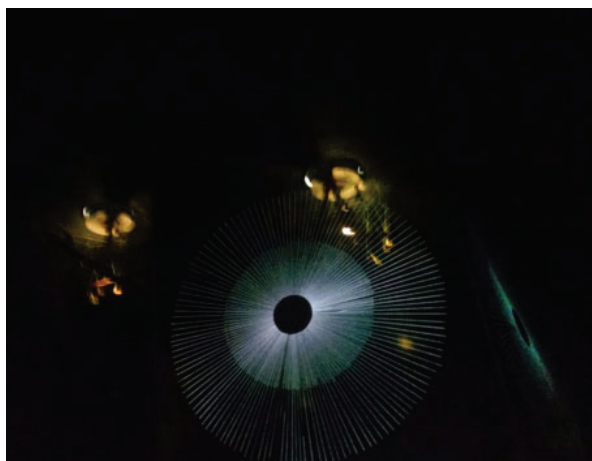
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personal experience with this particular, multi-faceted aesthetic of their own creation.

This aesthetic is challenging, thought-provoking, enlightening, and full of questions – everything seems imbued with deep meaning and power, yet with ambiguous provenance. I met with Feasley in the exhibition space to discuss, and potentially demystify, some of the symbolism and references involved in *Hatchet*. Although I left our meeting with perhaps more questions than I had come in with, I gained the understanding that mystery itself is at the core of the work.

The thorough consideration of space is apparent in the flow of the room and its influence on the way we see the individual pieces within it. There are no labels or lists identifying the many sculptures and paintings, and the placement of these objects seems random or easily manipulated, creating a kind of comfort in relating to them. Feasley's paintings are suspended along a long line of wooden pegs that invite reorganization, a sensibility that is also apparent in a collection of small objects on top of the mantel, including a bivalve fossil, a small, sculpted dog, and a bone. Feasley told me she attributes this particular moment to something she remembers from the original Barnes Foundation: in its fastidious attempts to maintain the vision of its patriarch, the staff at the Barnes had left an apparently random collection of objects atop a piece of furniture – a small seashell, some memorabilia from a trip – all of which were treated with the same reverence as the Matisse paintings surrounding them. Feasley sees this as a window into the collector's personal experience of the space, a comfort and familiarity among these relics. It also activates thoughts on illusion and presentation within a museum space; what environments are





created intentionally and accidentally, what moments of clarity come from random intervention into a meticulous re-creation.

Hatchet confronts the viewer with various choices between narrative interpretations of the space. For me, the feeling that it provided again and again was one of discovery and surprise – unexpected portals into alternate dimensions and links joining disparate objects into one distinct feeling. This is a strange sensation to experience in a fastidiously prepared Shaker living space, a design concept that I see as deeply rooted in earthly experience. But Shakerism maintains a complex mystical sensibility in its overarching asceticism, and many traditional objects present themselves as vehicles for attaining spiritual connection. Alongside pieces created by Feasley and Swenbeck are a few Shaker artifacts, one of which is an electrostatic device used to deliver mild shocks to an individual connected to it. This alarming machine sits casually beside a traditional Shaker chair, fastidiously created by Swenbeck on a lathe, which is balanced precariously atop four sculpted resin bottles – necessary to block the electrical current from the floor. Simplicity in design, fundamental to Shaker craftsmanship, is displayed here as a spiritual conduit and given a surprising new narrative. The seeming rigidity of function over form allows for a creative, spiritual freedom which threads throughout the installation.



This clean aesthetic was what initially drew Feasley and Swenbeck to the Shaker sensibility, along with an interest in the meditative potential of craft, with which both artists feel a strong connection. The creation of the objects in *Hatchet* involved the collaborative effort with the Fabric Workshop studio staff, who worked to create the braided rug (created from pieces of a dismantled rug made by Feasley's grandmother) and the traditional Shaker cape hanging by the fireplace. It is rare to see an artist's contemporary craft paired with elements of their inspiration, and the uniqueness of this opportunity adds to the sacred feeling of this space.

Both artists feel strongly about allowing the viewer to make their own connections, encouraging spontaneous (and perhaps uninformed) interpretations. Their reticence in providing background information on the work creates an egalitarian feeling among the objects, a strange sense of harmony. The installation becomes a generative space that lets the viewer access what Genet describes as the “nourishment,” and draw whatever conclusions please them.

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