

COVER STORY

Meth Lab of the Modern Psyche: Dr. Freud's Consulting Room

by DAVID BRODY

Published: May 11, 2012

The exhibition [B19] The Psychic Life of Objects invites artists to mull over the architecture, furniture, and overstuffed décor of Professor Dr. Sigmund Freud's Vienna office at Berggasse 19, that meth lab of the modern psyche. The results are smart, absurd, elegant, and wacky — and sometimes eerily coincidental. The very photographs, for example, that first documented this shrine and underlie many works in the show were taken by the father of a professor now at Long Island University, where [B19] happens to be mounted — so the curators Matt Freedman and Laurence Hegarty discovered in medias res. But read their poignantly hilarious essay (posted on the Romanov Grave website) for particulars about this and other visitations of the uncanny. There, one also learns that Freedman's father was a consulting psychiatrist at the trial of John Wayne Gacy. This murderer of 33 boys was too charming, it seems, to be ruled unfit by insanity, and was ultimately executed — which may inform one's encounter with Jude Tallichet's cast of the requisite analyst's couch from Professor Dr. Freedman's office. Tallichet's vivid red rubber mold is propped up with fragile struts — fragile premises? — and perhaps transmits, infinitesimally, Gacy's lounging impress.

In all, 19 diverse and lively artists (a coincidental number, no doubt) steer a course between Eros and Thanatos. Alan Wexler intertwines the misbehaving legs of a pair of chairs of subtly different hue, which reads as libidinous transference. Francis Cape bends his more solemn, deadpan carpentry to an atypically modern prototype, a therapist's chair, while referring us to an auto accident that confirms there are no accidents. (It was en route to therapy.)



Jane Irish, Winter Soldier in 1971 Urn, 2012. Low Fire whiteware, china paint, underglaze and luster, 15 x 11 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the Artist



Rob de Mar models the hanging plants of B19 minus the dirt and pots, exposing root structure with a flourish that handily maps the subterranean to the subconscious; while Kyle LoPinto turns Freud's cigars into gnarly rawhide turds, or maybe dried foreskins. (Sometimes a sculpture is just a sculpture, but assuredly not in this case.)

Bill Morrison has made a stately video from archival science films and text that tells the story of his great-grandfather's rivalry with Freud in the race to exploit the new wonder drug, cocaine. (Another coincidence: the Morrisons lived across the street from the Freedmans.) Elana Herzog vivisects Persian carpets with shag sunbursts, telling a story of — as one of her titles indicates — Civilization and its Discontents. David Humphrey's madcap figurine-assemblage and paintings epitomize free association, libido, and the pleasure principle. Here he pushes the clutter on Freud's desk to a cacophonous weirdness zone; while Jennie Nichols' take on the same subject is somber, orderly, and brown with mock-antiquity — by way of chocolate bunnies.

Jane Irish's critical role in [B19] is to remake Freud's collection of Greek urns as Meissen porcelain, adding an up-to-the-minute anti-war message. In John Huston's movie Freud (with an uncredited script by J.P. Sartre) Monty Clift as the father of psychoanalysis is unable to pass through the gates of the cemetery where his own father lies buried, a eureka moment in his derivation of the Oedipus Complex. Dramatically compressed or not, it's true that Freud never went six feet under: his remains are on permanent display, as Irish's proleptic ceramics remind us, in one of his urns. Fine contributions from Joe Amrhein, Matt Blackwell, Peter Drake and others round out this seriously irreverent exhibition, one in which a seemingly familiar totem brings forth abundant new taboos.

[B19] The Psychic Life of Objects at Long Island University Humanities Gallery
May 6 to June 9, 2012
1 University Plaza, Brooklyn
Hours: weekdays 9am to 6pm, weekends, 10am to 5pm