

This document is an extract from **engage 31:**
The Past in the Present, 2012, Karen Raney (ed.).
London: engage, the National Association for
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www.engage.org/journal

The Art of Unravelling the Past

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Unravelled works with historic properties to reinterpret their sites and collections by commissioning contemporary artists. These commissions result in new site-specific works that reveal the properties' multiple stories. This paper reflects on some of the issues that have come to light following the two initial projects – 'Unravelling the Manor House at Preston Manor' in 2010 and 'Unravelling Nymans' at **Nymans House and Gardens** in 2012 - as the project team gets ready to commission artists for their 2013 exhibition at the National Trust property in Hampshire, The Vyne.

In 2012, Unravelled opened an exhibition showing newly-commissioned, site-specific works by twelve contemporary artists at the National Trust property, Nymans House and Gardens in East Sussex. The exhibition is the first in a three-year partnership project between the arts commissioner and the National Trust and follows on from a pilot project, 'Unravelling the Manor House', at Preston Manor in 2010.

As an artist-led group, we were fascinated with how these very specific environments would influence what the artists made, and in turn, how those artworks would influence how visitors and staff responded to the historic houses.

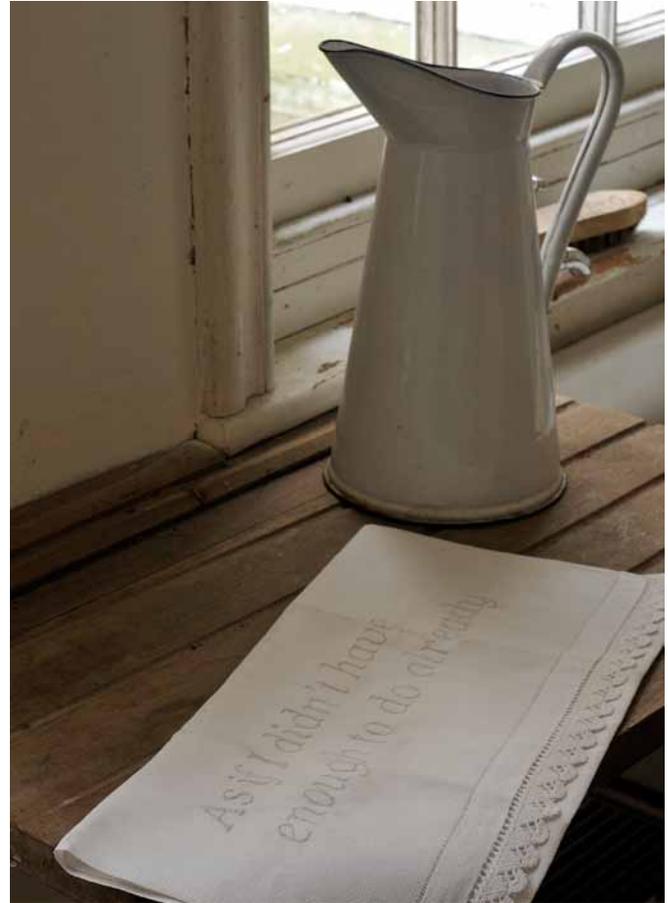
Working with historic houses raises specific questions for contemporary curating. A long way from the impersonal white cubes currently favoured by contemporary art, historic houses provide settings where issues of gender, emotional ties, domesticity and changing social values are very hard to ignore. Working within the houses, it is difficult not to form emotional bonds with the previous residents.

Whilst there is the option to place art within these properties, almost as props within elaborate stage sets, digging into the histories we are told about them provides rich pickings for artists and visual and intellectual feasts for visitors. Rather than impose an exhibition theme or idea, we have been very keen that the site itself is the core of the story. We therefore asked artists to propose interventions



based on their responses to the sites and the stories related to them. In some way, the artists have taken on a curatorial role, retelling and reinterpreting the site through visual art.

However, there is a crucial difference between how the artists have interpreted the houses and the approach of the curatorial team. When selecting the artists, we are interested in honesty over fact and were willing to select work based on hunches,



feelings and intuition as well as documented evidence. The exhibitions therefore occupy a place somewhere between historical accuracy and storytelling. However, as I will explain, if we rely solely on 'documented accuracy' we are confined to a narrow and selected view of history.

Nymans House is a fake. It's a very good fake, but it is a fake. It therefore seemed the perfect place for us to start working with the National Trust. The



house is sited in the High Weald and benefits from a particular microclimate, making it ideal for horticulture. It was with this in mind that Ludwig Messel bought the country estate in 1890 and began developing one of the foremost English gardens. Ludwig had been born in Germany and moved to England in 1868, swiftly moving up from being a clerk to setting up his own stockbrokers' firm. Purchasing Nymans was seen as a way of sealing his position in English society, a trajectory that would see his great grandson become the Queen's brother-in-law when he married Princess Margaret.

The house that Ludwig Messel bought was an early Victorian villa which he added to and modified. However this wasn't to the taste of his daughter-in-law, Maud, who on inheriting the house rebuilt it as a 'medieval' manor house 'begun in the 14th century and added to intermittently till Tudor times'.¹ In a manner similar to the robber barons of New York, Maud made her way around the

Cotswolds picking up historic architectural fragments and incorporating them into her new vision, a vision she shared with husband Leonard and their three children: Linley, Anne and Oliver.

What saved Nymans from being simply a pastiche was the incompetence of post-war plumbers. As a result of warming a frozen pipe with a blow lamp, a plumber managed to set fire to the house, leaving most of it in ruins and providing the Messels with a Gothic masterpiece. This has left the property with a haunting quality: a small, habitable core of a building within much larger ruins.

Going around the house, we were struck by the uneasy mix of elderly isolation and camp theatricality. The house was last lived in by Anne Messel who moved there when she was a widow. Traces of the solitary existence of this elderly woman still pervade the house. In contrast, there is a television set that was customised by her brother, the stage designer Oliver Messel, into a theatre with red curtains and tasselling.

The house is presented by the Trust as it was when Anne last lived there. Moving away from this one preserved period in the house's history and exploring some of the many competing stories and personal histories associated with the site, was the challenge we gave to the commissioned artists. We also wanted to somehow collapse time between Anne's solitary final days and the period when Nymans was a site for make-believe, dressing up, socialising and play. We purposefully concentrated

on commissioning artists who work with craft skills, since however conceptually these skills are realised, they tap into a heritage of making. This provides the artworks with a tangible connection to the past, as often the skills employed by the contemporary makers have not changed over hundreds of years. We hope that when visitors recognise these skills through their contemporary employment it may help them to make new connections with the past.

Bringing change to historic properties raises competing emotions. More than museums and galleries with their temporary exhibition programmes, historic houses often seem to be frozen at one point in time. In reality, these houses that were lived in were sites of constant flux and change. The (albeit temporary) insertion of 'foreign' artworks into a house saved for posterity raises interesting, and occasionally challenging, questions for artists, staff and visitors alike.

Julian Walker works with these ideas of change and reuse in his pieces that unpick and re-stitch antique textiles. He questions the assumptions that we make about historic houses, the illusion that time can be stopped and that the rules of everyday life are somehow suspended. To some extent, we buy into this artifice when visiting historic houses, embracing safe and sanitised versions of domesticity. What were built as living, breathing, constantly changing spaces have become static; what were places to inhabit have become sites of spectacle.

Walker's work also raises interesting questions about the value of objects. By taking historic textiles, usually made by unnamed women, and reworking them and assigning his name and identity to them, he moves them from 'low-worth craft' into 'high-value art'.

As with any history, the stories told at historic properties are selective. This is done partly to provide visitors with a coherent narrative, partly to exploit the most interesting stories, and partly reflects the interests and values of the staff and organisation that run the house. Artistic intervention can make this selectivity more apparent and thus open to scrutiny.

Lauren Frances Adams' *Grand Tour Fan* punctures the myth of a bucolic past of affluence and leisure. Adopting the design of a fan owned by the Messel family and replacing its pastoral images with images of Gatwick Airport, Lauren collides the historical ideal with the worldly reality of Nymans' location near a busy airport. Sometimes it takes an outsider's eye to highlight the absurdity of situations we take for granted: Lauren conceived and made the work in St Louis, Missouri, before bringing it over for installation at the property.

Caitlin Heffernan's sculptures explore the childhood (and adult) dressing up and performance that was a core part of the Messels' life. Oscillating between the joyful and the sinister, and involving a huge amount of labour, Caitlin's installations are based both on images of Oliver Messel dressed as cupid

for the family Christmas card, and also on the 'Tree Man' drawings he produced as an adult for theatrical costume designs.

The wealth that the family amassed allowed them the freedom to play that was not generally available to the working staff that facilitated their lifestyle. Spending time at a property, you become very aware of the huge amount of labour that goes into maintaining a house and garden to the standards of their heyday. Outnumbering the family, the routine movements of the large workforce left physical traces of wear upon the properties but their stories are often undocumented. Caitlin's work speaks of both the joy of childhood pretence and play of privileged children, whilst the time involved in making it mirrors the labour of the working class at many large houses.

Gender and sexuality can also be skewed in the interpretation of many historic houses. Family trees are ubiquitous, and these privilege not only the male line through which title and ownership passes, but also the relationships of those in society who can, or choose to, get married and have children.

Anne and her brother Linley were both married twice. Their failed and successful marriages are fully documented in the Nymans family tree and in the guidebooks. In contrast, their brother Oliver is talked about solely in terms of his career and relationship to other family members. The reality is that Oliver had a very public relationship with

another man, Vagn Riis-Hansen, who was also his business partner, for nearly thirty years. This raises interesting and difficult questions for curators and visitors alike. Society's views on same-sex desire have changed dramatically over the last two decades, but the interpretation in historic houses often excludes and erases the relationships of gay men and women from history.

Historic houses are not alone in this. Museums and galleries have been challenged on their lack of representation of same-sex relationships.² However, there is something particularly challenging and poignant about omitting or erasing these relationships from domestic spaces – one of the few spaces where same-sex desire could be acted out safely before it was decriminalised in 1967.

My own piece, *Piccadilly 1830*, attempts to address this by placing a recreation of one of Oliver's designs on an antique sculpture in the house. The Highlander costume was designed by Oliver for the Russian dancer Serge Lifar. Following the production, the costume was adapted for Oliver to wear to a party in Paris given by Daisy Fellowes, the editor-in-chief of French *Harper's Bazaar*.

In an exaggeration of military dress – one of the few occasions for men to wear feathers without raising eyebrows – the work goes further and incorporates glass beads and ostrich plumes, materials more commonly associated with showgirls than soldiers.



The work aims to compress the time between when Oliver first wore the jacket and when his sister lived at the house, merging a high point for Oliver, and a low point for Anne. By the time Anne moved to Nymans, both Oliver and Anne's relationships had ended, as they had both been widowed. Artwork and site came together when the piece was placed in location on the Roman



sculpture *The Antique Youth*. The sculpture, which has lost its nose and its genitals, lends the intervention a sense of the cadaverous as well as commenting on the de-sexing of the original designer.

When going around a historic property, complex and contradictory rooms can make visitor

orientation difficult. It is therefore unsurprising that overarching narratives are sometimes placed on a property. By taking twelve distinct points of departure, the artworks visually signpost, and allow visitors to access, discrete insights into alternative aspects of the property and its pasts.

Just as there are many stories associated with a house, there are many different audiences at historic houses, with different wants and needs. We were very conscious when commissioning and interpreting work that what excited us about the artworks would need to be able to be communicated by the volunteer visitor guides. With such layered and complicated spaces, each artwork could be contextualised in numerous ways, which allowed us to shape slightly different messages for different audience groups.

Historic houses can be unfairly perceived as sources of tea towels, cream teas and conservative values. By allowing exhibitions to question the histories contained in their houses, The National Trust is challenging those assumptions about historic houses and potentially opening up their houses to audiences who would not normally see them as relevant. For some, these sites are symbols of a glorious past, for others they are sites of exploitation and discrimination. Exploring some of the complex and at times difficult truths of history will hopefully allow us to look back with more honesty and to appreciate the past, as well as contemporary life with its greater equality and inclusiveness.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Hussey, architectural writer for *Country Life*, quoted in *Nymans*, The National Trust, p.10
- 2 Frost, S., 'Are Museums doing enough to address LGBT history?' in *Museums Journal*, January 2011, p.19

Images

- 1 Caitlin Heffernan, *Hide and Seek*, Nyman's House, 2012. Photo: Sussie Ahlberg
- 2 Julian Walker, *As if*, Nyman's House, 2012. Photo: Sussie Ahlberg
- 3 Lauren Frances Adams, *Grand Tour Fan*, Nyman's House, 2012. Photo: Sussie Ahlberg
- 4 Matt Smith, *Piccadilly 1830*, Nymans House, 2012. Photo: Sussie Ahlberg
- 5 Television set customised by Oliver Messel into a curtained theatre. Photo: Sussie Ahlberg