

The home stretch

Preview of 'Burning Down The House'

Jamestown Arts Center

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By Alexander Castro

Installation artists enliven the Jamestown Art Center with their interpretations of where and how we live



Joan Backes, 'Primary Color Resin Houses,' 2014 Cast resin, 5" x 5" x 5"

A recent headline in Adweek asked "Could House Hunter Be HGTV's Gateway Drug?" The vice president of the network stated that the show "lets you live vicariously through a set of homeowners." What's suggested here is that watching people buy bigger, better property is somehow narcotic, addictive in its fantasy. Now in its 16th year, "House Hunters" evidences the ostensibly harmless but subliminally bizarre American obsession with home owning.

While planning a new exhibit for the Jamestown Arts Center, curator Robert P. Stack of Yellow Peril Gallery in Providence realized something elemental at the base of this house hysteria: “We use nature to build our shelters against nature,” he says. That idea soon blossomed into “Burning Down the House,” opening with a preview on July 3, as part of JAC’s Fifth Annual Summer Soirée. An artists’ reception will be held on July 25, and a performance evening is scheduled for August 7.

“Burning Down the House” fits nicely with Yellow Peril’s stated mission to “exhibit provocative and visually arresting artwork created specifically to ignite conversations.” Rather than reiterate the usual view of home as a cozy, secure place, Stack questions these assumptions and asks us to consider the “foreboding, secret thing lurking under the surface.”

This exploration of home and house was nearly incidental. It “almost came naturally” from the space, Stack says. He doesn’t dislike themed shows but feels an overarching narrative can constrain the curation process. “I curate like an architect,” says Stack, noting his fondness for installations and sculpture. “I look at the space and I get inspired ... The shows are really interventions or interactions with the space, rather than just something that’s in a gallery.”

Stack began with a crack team of installation artists who could enliven the JAC space. Phillipe Lejeune’s manufactured, coffee-stained shingles echo the beach houses of Jamestown, offering an unmissable comment on nature-as-shield in a site-specific piece.

“I always want to do a show that transforms the space, but in a cooperative, reactionary kind of way,” Stack explains. As the JAC was populated with Joan Backes’ house sculptures and Brooke Erin Goldstein’s quilted room, Stack recruited Quintín Rivera Toro and Jon Laustsen, artists who riffed on the “iconographic language” of a house — in other words, what every child learns in preschool: a triangle fixed to a square, with a chimney piping steam.

Several of the artists plumb deeper, reevaluating the dark depths of domesticity. In “All Covered Up and Tucked in Tight,” Goldstein seeks “honest[y] about childhood, pleasure and pain, and being vulnerable.” Jennifer Avery, meanwhile, serves her signature mix of playful and possessed with a papier-mâché playhouse that references both “monks and oral history,” Stack says. Works by Sophia Sobers (plants and plastic bags, hinting both “baggage” and the “ethereal”) and Carol Scavotto (a performance of her parents’ love letters) add to these themes.

Occupying more traditional 2D territory are photographers Frances F. Denny and Polibio Diaz. Denny’s “struggle with an inherited definition of femininity” is relayed through her

somewhat claustrophobic images, where her subjects — an unfinished wedge of cake, her mother’s anxious-looking hands, rooms creeping with silence — are enclosed in squares. Diaz’s series “Interiores” offers contrasting form and content as the bright, saturated insides of Dominican homes are revealed in diptychs and triptychs. Where Denny compresses the domestic landscape, Diaz stretches it.



Joan Backes *Steel House* ©2015

Stack says the exhibit’s title “speaks to this diva attitude,” and Diaz’s campy and captivating tableaux level the house as Stack intended. In visuals and concept, it appears that “Burning Down the House” will be a successful demolition. Says Stack: “Hopefully I’ve provided everyone with some diva moments.”



Joan Backes *Steel Stilt House*

A wise move: when used tactfully, spectacle is a strong ally for starting a dialogue. For Stack, who believes “it’s important to talk about everything...and not to whitewash things or pretend that things didn’t happen,” art is best when it invites not just stares but talk.

This concept of home had me rapt in thought for quite a while; I started searching for the right quote to tie it all together. I found it in Sigmund Freud’s suggestion that the first human-built homes were “a substitute for the mother’s womb, the first lodging.” It’s a dramatic and symbolic comparison, sure; but accurate in an emotive way, hinting at the subterranean feelings that bind us to the safety of home. As the artists burning down the JAC demonstrate, life is transformed when we dare to burst outside the comfort of our little boxes