

Luring the eye to something beyond



Shellburne Thurber's "9 Wellington Street: Dresser with Alien doll and blue upholstered chair"

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Shellburne Thurber's remarkable exhibition at Barbara Krakow Gallery at first presents itself as a loving and faithful document of the ornate and eccentric home of her friend Ralph Horne, who lived for decades in a house in the South End. The installation revolves around Thurber's haunting photographs, installed on reproductions of wallpaper from Horne's home, surrounded by toys and other objects he owned and accompanied by his hallucinatory paintings.

But not all the wallpaper in the installation is really a reproduction. Not all the objects are from Horne's home. And that's just the beginning of Thurber's hall of mirrors.

Thurber started out in the 1970s in a tight-knit group of photographers, including Nan Goldin, Mark Morrisroe, and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, who became known as the Boston School. They made intimate portraits spotlighting their everyday lives. Thurber has come to explore the intimacies of unoccupied rooms.

She shot the interior of Horne's home in natural light before he moved away in 2009. The windows, doors, and mirrors lure the eye to something beyond. The photographs appear to lead from one to the next, through doors, down hallways, or into looking glasses. The pull us in like a portal to a circuitous place of imagination and light that's almost tactile.

"9 Wellington Street: Ralph's bedroom - Dresser

with Alien doll and blue upholstered chair" focuses on a blue-and-white china bowl and ewer on a marble-topped dresser beside a large, dark alien action figure. In the bureau's mirror, we see across the room and into the next, which has the same patterned pink wallpaper that Thurber has installed on the wall across the gallery, placing us, for an instant, within Horne's space. Light pours through the window to the right, exposing a lengthy cobweb.

The whiff of decrepitude in these images mingles with Thurber's fascination for how Horne's home became his canvas, a depository for his own restless imagination. This show pays tribute to the way we create ourselves, how that is reflected in our homes, and how that facade can shift, accommodate, and erode. But as with so many Thurber's photographs, these images of unoccupied rooms also invite the viewer to envision the life that took place here. The absence of this story's protagonist is sad. And somehow, his presence, palpable amid the details and the decay, is equally heart-rending.

Shellburne Thurber
9 Wellington Street
At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,
10 Newbury St.,
through April 26th.
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