

Artists offer fresh views of objects at Chipstone's Fox Point campus

Though not able to receive many visitors, the Chipstone Foundation has become a laboratory for the fresh presentation of old objects.



A 1970s period room at the Chipstone Foundation in Fox Point, created by artists Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg.

By Rafael Francisco Salas, Art City contributor

July 15, 2016

A lonely mansion tucked away in Fox Point is home to the Chipstone Foundation's collection of American furniture, historical prints and 17th- and 18th-century British pottery. The staff is sparse, the space is vast and there are secrets unfolding everywhere.

Far from being a musty, eroded collection, Chipstone contains a series of rooms recently made by living artists, contemporary art that interweaves with historical work, and a touchable, teachable environment that includes workshops on historical techniques and innovative interactions with the collection.

The Chipstone Foundation was created from the legacy of Polly and Stanley Stone, a local couple, and their collection of objects. The foundation's mission is to create new ways to examine these objects and to reinterpret viewers' experiences. Sarah Anne Carter, a Chipstone curator, describes how viewers can encounter objects and their meanings in new ways far removed from the traditional, don't-touch museums experiences with wall texts and art behind glass. At Chipstone the experience of history is immersive. One can smell, taste and walk within it.

Artists were asked to create environments on the Chipstone grounds, rooms that comment on and use the collection. They call it "The Museum of Rooms." The anchor is a space that reimagines a 1970s American living room. Artists Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg created a wood-paneled, shag-carpeted room with the colors and vibe of the period.



A 1970s period room at the Chipstone Foundation in Fox Point, created by artists Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg. Photo by Jim Wildeman.

An LP record was playing when I walked in. I was invited to pour a drink from the bar or smoke if I desired. Earth-toned Op-Art hung on the wall and lamps glowed amber. Instead of walking around and looking at objects, I sat and listened to the record and felt like I was somewhere familiar but unattainable, a liminal, half-remembered dream. A clock ticked, but its hands turned in reverse. I noticed a small, roughly hewn ceramic owl tucked into a niche.

This whimsical, weird bird melds perfectly with the groovy room, but is in fact an English Staffordshire work from the late 18th century. It is an object out of time, reappearing in another age. The fact that this little owl feels like it is from the '70s begs viewers to ask why. What is the difference in the maker's intent as opposed to the viewer's interpretation? How does context affect how

we see historical objects? This room reminds us that nothing is objective and that history, like the backward clock, does not move in seamless progression.

McCaw and Budsberg also created an adjoining room called "Study for a Character." As its title suggests, someone was just there. A candle is burning, there are herbs and sage bundled on a table and bottles, bird's nests and dried plants scattered about. The character appears to be an amateur collector or someone who spends her days outside and brings precious parts of it back with her. There is an economical, caned rocking chair and careworn wooden desks filled with apothecary bottles and specimens. It might be an American settler's house on the edge of a vast wilderness, but we cannot know for sure.

The room evolves into a character. Everything that has been touched, arranged and examined is a compilation of the self. It becomes a somewhat uncanny experience, like seeing a ghost.

"Study," by Ashley Morgan, is a room with a romantic view of Lake Michigan that once contained bookshelves, a desk and a trash can. However, now the room only houses dust. The furniture and artwork have been removed. Only the silhouettes of these objects remain, outlined in the neglected gloom. The ceiling is crumbling and the paint is peeling. We must imagine the titles of the books and the subjects of the artworks. It is a reflection on absence and memory.



The "Study for a Character" installation at the Chipstone Foundation, created by artists Shana McCaw and Brent Budsberg. Courtesy Brent Budsberg and Shana McCaw.

Other works in "The Museum of Rooms" include an architectonic installation by Tim Stoelting that feels like a hyper-modern spaceship. It reduces architecture to minimal black and white necessity and furniture to the precarious edge of functionality. I was reminded of "The Matrix," and rightly so. Stoelting is now a resident artist at NASA.

The Fox Point campus of the Chipstone Foundation keeps a low profile. Located in a residential neighborhood, it is unable to accommodate large groups. Luckily, Chipstone also has exhibits and permanent installations on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum. The mysterious "Mrs. M---s Cabinet" utilizes objects from the Chipstone collection to flesh out a fictional character. In addition, ceramic vessels by the African-American slave Dave the Potter are on view as well as other treasures from Chipstone's holdings.

Though somewhat sequestered, The Chipstone Foundation has created indelible marks on the study of art and how we experience it.

The Chipstone Foundation in Fox Point is open by appointment only. Other ways to engage with Chipstone collections include its galleries at the Milwaukee Art Museum, videos and resources online and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Library for the Decorative Arts and Material Culture.

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