

CAROLYN WREN

Dwell

January 13 – February 11,
2017

Opening Reception
Friday, January 13
6:30-8:30 pm



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DWELLING IN POSSIBILITIES

BY MILIJANA MLADJAN

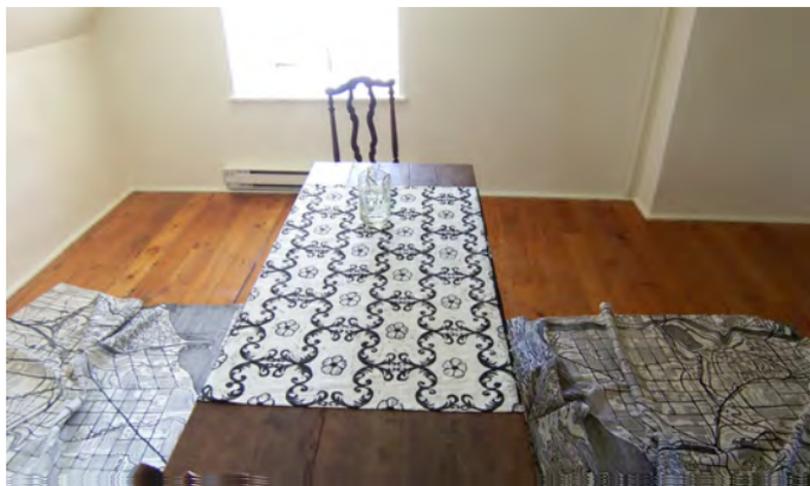
“Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.”

—Martin Heidegger¹

Charting the murky waters of identity in her work, artist Carolyn Wren confidently proclaims: “Who I am is where I am.”² Home is more than a feeling for her, more than an abstract ideal or future la la land, but rather one tethered in reality, an anchor to history and a harbour of self. A real place firmly rooted yet fluid enough from which to branch out. It evolves and expands, but never loses its bearings, whirling away from its foundations in a fantastical tornado.

Wren’s installation *Dwell* consists of a wooden table, two chairs, a pitcher and a linocut-printed linen tablecloth. All the objects come from the material world that she has cultivated—her house and backyard garden studio in a quiet Thoreau-esque neighbourhood of St. Catharines, Ontario. The feminine and the domestic are at work here, in a comfortable albeit contested territory. She uses place, her dwelling in Niagara, as both a physical and philosophical point of departure (and destination) to examine and externalize the complexities of personhood, namely the politics of contemporary womanhood. It is a humble yet thoughtful meditation on her life as she lives *in* it, a sensitive orchestration of self, belonging, and the fraught conditions of being female—the modern divided woman.

The magic of the piece is that it is transcendently human. It’s remarkable how place can suggest, reflect and inflect us—ostensibly, *is* us. These often tangential, everyday concerns are commingled with the loftier existential conundrums that we all encounter and that women still struggle against in a dominant universal male world order. Yet, there is a quiet strength to the grace and grandeur of the work. This self-representation does not accost the viewer with loud inflammatory colours, livid slogans or shapes, but rather unpretentiously coaxes, invites you to look and think and linger and look again, to dwell a little longer than you expected. It exerts an extraordinary mute power that builds momentum. It reveals itself bit by bit, much like an onion or the manifold layers of identity itself, if one takes the time to further



explore it. It is a dramatic unfolding, like the undulating Niagara landscape with its famous principal protagonist, the mighty Niagara Falls, whose thundering presence is also too deafening to ignore, at closer range.

This embodied landscape features plants, specifically flax, as one of the dominant textile motifs. These dainty cold-hardy flowers punctuate the elegant design. A runner made from damask (a hallmark of social class and refinement since the 17th century) traverses the narrow tabletop, and then, slips abruptly from that precarious slab—from high culture downward into raw sublime nature with the cascades of the Falls, erupting onto either side. Developed by Edmund Burke and further expounded by Baruch Spinoza and Immanuel Kant, among others in the 19th century, the idea of the sublime was to experience the “awe-full,” the painful, the terrifying and the disorienting—to become supplicant to sheer force of nature.³ From contained cultural beauty to unhinged natural chaos, the sharp transition from one space to another is palpably felt, not only seen, in Wren’s tablecloth. The progression follows, from the flat dolomite ledge atop The Falls, evoked by the tabletop edge itself, as the fabric gushes downward to the *terra ferma*, to the streams, creeks, farms and fields that hug Lake Ontario’s southern shore. Small towns and tributaries twist, settle and wade at the viewer’s feet. There is a real sensation of movement, both optically and haptically, in an otherwise, seemingly static state of immaculate surfaces. Controlled yet coming undone, *Dwell* disrupts this genteel pretense of domesticity, illusions of homemaking, notions of permanence, traditional femininity and conventional printmaking with one fell swoop.

Maps embody and publicize the “personalization” of place. Wren has almost a geographer’s penchant for topographical accuracy, and maps and

mapping are a recurring trope and ever-evolving metaphor in her print-based oeuvre. The intersection and imposition of culture onto nature and nature back onto culture is played out repeatedly in various details of this piece, including the glass pitcher—an inert cultural object, here enlivened with water. The geographic reality of a place is transposed, yet transfixed, onto the abstract patterns of a map; however, it is more than all over abstractions—patterning for pattern's sake—for they are actual navigational tools. This reality is where she dwells—her fixed address—where her daily life, like her laundry, gets done—as well as the setting for the ideas with which she feels most at home to prod intellectually and artistically.

This installation, most immediately, recalls the feminist aesthetics of Miriam Schiparo, as well Judy Chicago's iconic *Dinner Party* from 1979. While the results are different, the aims are similar. There is no enclosed space, no governed gynarchic terrain, to keep a person out: anyone can access the work. Wren doesn't seek to recoup a lost female history, but is in search of a place, reclaiming space or a seat for women at the proverbial head of the table, within a patriarchal narrative of gender politics. Food and home cooking figured prominently in her childhood, and throughout her adult life she hosted suppers around this very table.

"To dwell is to garden,"⁴ wrote the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, and Wren, having already planted 300 spring bulbs the morning we met, doesn't feel her creativity devoured by domesticity. Her home—like her life and her art—is an act of want or deliberate will as well as good old-fashioned hard work. She enjoys the process, the grind, the friction, the weight of the work in the face of the domestic—those matters considered by some too mundane, toilsome or, by extension, stereotypically feminine.

Wren laughingly remarks, from the comfy confines of her armchair, "I'm a nester." This burrowing tic is evident. Her home is filled with a handsome collection of eclectic, fine things, both amassed and displayed with care yet with none of the fussy neurotic tensions or the sterile silences of a museum. Welcoming, earthy, exquisite and inclusive, much like the artist herself, the installation is a homey portal that opens into a field of endless possibilities—a void dripping with exuberance. It is honest and vulnerable in its expression and provocation to ponder where and why we dwell and how those places might foreground our imaginings and becomings. Because, luckily, as Dorothy straight out of Oz would wonderfully chime: "There's no place like home."

Artist Bio

CAROLYN WREN

Born in St. Catharines, Ontario, Carolyn Wren studied visual art at the University of Western Ontario. Wren has been exploring themes of lost knowledge and metanarratives in her recent work of transcribing iconic texts to create her installations. In the past she has used relief print methods and processes in non-traditional ways. Key exhibitions include: Rodman Hall Art Centre, Brock University (St Catharines, ON); Kelowna Art Gallery (Kelowna, BC); The University of Sherbrooke (Sherbrooke, QC); Cram International Gallery (St Catharines, ON); and Linen Biennale (Portneuf, QC). She has been exhibiting her work since 1990 in group and solo shows in public galleries and artist-run centres across Canada.

Author Bio

MILIJANA MLADJAN

Milijana Mladjan is a writer, researcher, art & architecture lecturer, and independent curator, having worked in Toronto (at the AGO, Aga Khan Museum, ROM and Design Exchange) and internationally in Miami, Rome and Istanbul. She is also a professional chef, namaste jock, lover of pottery, gardening and ticklish subjects.

Images

All images: *Dwell*, 2009, installation view, as installed at Linen Biennale, Portneuf, QC, table, chairs, linocut on linen, table cloth 78" x 144", installation dimension variable.

¹ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. 160.

² All quotes from Carolyn Wren taken from a discussion with the author, November 8, 2016.

³ For a feminist rethinking of "the sublime" see: Freeman, Barbara Claire. *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California press, 1997.

⁴ Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Off the Beaten Track*. Ed & trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002. 3.

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