



# Home Sweet Home

Montserrat College  
of Art

CURATED BY LEONIE BRADBURY



Montserrat College  
of Art  
Galleries



ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

SAMANTHA FIELDS

KIRSTEN REYNOLDS

# Home Sweet Home

COVER

**Elizabeth Alexander**

*Keeping Up Appearances:*

*The Mean Reds*, detail, 2011

LEFT AND TOP

**Samantha Fields**

*Curtain Mother*, detail, 2011

November 4, 2011 – January 21, 2012

ESSAYS BY

Leonie Bradbury

E. Tornai Thyssen, Ph.D.





*Home Sweet Home  
Installation View, 2011*

## Home Sweet Home

Leonie Bradbury

*Home Sweet Home* features site-specific installations by three New England artists: Elizabeth Alexander, Samantha Fields, and Kirsten Reynolds. Each artist explores the boundaries of 'the home' within both an architectural and feminist context. Together they provide a critique of the cultural power structure that is the domestic sphere. Each artist engages specifically with both exterior and interior walls as the primary signifier of home, challenging the essential function that is performed by these architectural elements to create boundaries between outside and in, and the public and the private.

Architecture is a reflection of our relationship with space and provides a stage for the act of life. Combined with the act of living, it is what makes a shelter a home. In the words of architect Alex Schweder La, "Architecture is a psychological experience, a visual and emotional reflection of our bodies in space. Architecture is a cultural construct and buildings are a reflection of who we would like to be."<sup>1</sup> The home is both a real and a symbolic space, functional, but laden with meaning and memories. Home in this exhibition is presented as a stage for gender roles to be either played out or thwarted.

Gender theorist Judith Butler questions the belief that certain gendered behaviors are natural, suggesting the ways that one's learned performance of gendered behavior (what we commonly associate with femininity and masculinity) is a sort of performance, one that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality.<sup>2</sup> Gender is a concept, a socially and culturally constructed one that has placed the masculine and feminine in binary op-

position. The masculine has generally been identified as, "active, dominating, adventurous, rational, creative," where as the feminine has become identified as "passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional."<sup>3</sup> Within an art context this binary opposition can be further broken down with the stereotypical masculine as 'bold, geometric, intellectual, large scale, architectural, and gestural' vs. the feminine of 'decorative, patterned, emotional, small scale, interior design, and craft.' *Home Sweet Home* features three female artists who combine these preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity in a new and inventive way.

Alexander, Fields and Reynolds employ the visual language related to the home to unveil embedded assumptions, struggles and cultural biases regarding gender identity. Their efforts to 'unpack' a place of great cultural power connects strongly to the deconstructive impulse propelled by women artists in the 1970s. Art historian Helaine Posner clearly states, "Not only was the deconstructive impulse propelled in significant measure by women, but it reflected specifically female and highly individualized experiences of power, and constraint."<sup>4</sup> Each of the artists in *Home Sweet Home* examines various gender assumptions related to the home and examines traditional gender signifiers within an architectural context.

Elizabeth Alexander uses decorative embellishment as a transformative tool to manipulate objects, materials and space in a way that alters perception. Pattern, color, and texture are used to seduce the viewer, while masking the tension created by the obsessive pattern cutting within a domestic setting. Says Alexander, "I employ decorative arts and formal aesthetics as vehicles to evoke desire, prosperity, and escapism in places typically lacking those characteristics. The final result is a reinterpretation

of space and material, a blurring of reality, memory, and imagination.”<sup>5</sup> Through interventions with the everyday, Alexander represents the familiar standards of objects and space, manipulated in a way that changes one’s perception of them from ordinary to magnificent.



Boston based installation artist Samantha Fields combines embroidery with found building materials such as plastic siding to create an installation that focuses on the tension between interior and exterior space. Fields states, “The home has been investigated structurally as both house and family, critically and phenomenally as the uncanny, as the location of safety (privacy) and threat (exposure), and as the birthplace of desires fulfilled and unfulfilled. It’s the setting for an everyday spectacle. And when we cross away from the threshold, we inevitably play a different role than the one inside.”<sup>6</sup> The artist specifically examines the roles people play within the home in order to investigate the power structures that exist there.

Kirsten Reynolds’ architectural constructions exist at a point between collapse and creation. She combines decorative origami patterns and 2 by 4’s with dramatically arranged reproductions of domestic objects, such as a mop and bucket, to physically incorporate the viewer. Says Reynolds, “The posed drama of the architectural ‘stage’ exists in a state of limbo until the viewer chooses to enter, becoming both spectator and actor. Useless or interstitial spaces invite peeping, the object’s integrity

is questionable and boundaries defining the real, the remembered and the virtual are playfully confused.”<sup>7</sup>

Alexander, Fields and Reynolds mash up the visual language of a home’s exterior, interior and underlying structure. That which has been is conventionally perceived as masculine, is replaced with or counteracted by the traditionally feminine language of pattern and craft. In doing so they challenge notions of gender roles within domestic space, which either adhere to historical gender differentiation or yield to configure change as permeability between the exterior and interior increases.

#### NOTES

1. Alex Schweder La, artist talk, Montserrat College of Art, September 19, 2011.
2. Butler, Judith, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4. (Dec., 1988), pp. 519-531.
3. Felluga, Dino. “Terms Used by Theorists of Gender & Sex.” *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*.
4. Posner, Helaine, “Hot and Cool: Feminist Art in Practice.” In *The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power, 1973-1991*, ed. Nancy Princenthal, (Neurenberger Museum of Art, 2011).
5. Elizabeth Alexander, “Artist Statement,” 2011.
6. Samantha Fields, “Artist Statement,” 2011.
7. Kirsten Reynolds, “Artist Statement,” 2011.

#### LEFT

**Elizabeth Alexander**  
*Keeping Up Appearances:*  
*The Mean Reds*, detail, 2011



**Kirsten Reynolds**  
*Being Done Before, detail, 2011*



**Elizabeth Alexander**  
*Tea, 2011*





**Elizabeth Alexander**  
*Keeping Up Appearances:  
The Mean Reds, detail, 2011*



## Keeping up Appearances<sup>1</sup>

E. Tornai Thyssen

Elizabeth Alexander's installation uses the versatile wallpaper made for interior decoration. Wallpaper references domestic interiors and also signifies affluence and social aspirations. Its current form evolved in England and its popularity persists since the end of the 18th century, coinciding with the separation of the American colonies from the British Empire. Such historical indebtedness enables Alexander to explore both social and personalized meanings, as she embraces her American working class roots and also her British heritage. The installation is conceived in terms of self-portraiture and autobiographical reflection within the larger context of domesticity and history.

Wallpaper is treated as a found object. Never pasted to any wall, the pristine lengths are subjected to a thousand cuts until most of the pattern is excised, leaving behind the monochrome background with large voids. This alteration turns the two-dimensional surface into volume in front, behind, and through the paper's plane. The cut-outs are also redeployed in the surrounding space. Performing an inversion, the decorative now becomes functional, collaged into household items like a rug and a chandelier.

One expects floral and paisley designs to evoke the tranquility and beauty of a home, but Alexander's reworking voids the original function. With its ornament removed, the monochrome remainder assumes a new identity and the holes project the paranoia of encountering unknown structures while unmaking the established and the familiar. A feminist motivation may smolder in the aggressive, obsessive removal of all decorative ele-

ments to force several dialogues at once. Is this an attack on the domestic environment in opposition to the acceptance of patriarchy historically supplying the economic underpinnings for wallpapered interiors? Is this a recuperation of ornament by a woman artist, historically associated with craft and the decorative? Or is this the autopsy of domestic space where woman had allowed herself to be trapped and now finds the very structure of entrapment as nothing other than ornament?

The installation is completed by the recorded sounds of the action of cutting to implicate the body of the artist in action, who wields the creative power to reshape her environment. Thus the sound confirms the identity of the subject and reignites the personal and autobiographical in the installation's context. Is there an inquiry pitting class, gender and heritage that results in anxiety and the need to control appearances?

While the artist's agency is personal and audible, it merges with responses to historical prompters like the archetypal feminist text, "The Yellow Wallpaper," rediscovered in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Alexander is very much in conversation with layers of history, and has thought hard about the modernist prohibition against ornament. Its deep roots were expressed by Owen Jones in the 19th century when he wrote that "construction should be decorated, decoration should never be purposely constructed."<sup>3</sup> Later refined by Louis Sullivan into the well-known "form follows function" adage, consistently the masculine prescription, which is skillfully dismantled in this installation.

### NOTES

1. Title borrowed from of BBC television drama currently on WGBH Boston.
2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1892 (Reprinted 1973), Conversation with the author, October 6, 2011 Gloucester, MA.
3. Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, 1856.



**Kirsten Reynolds**  
*Being Done Before*  
detail, 2011

## Being Done Before

E. Tornai Thyssen

Kirsten Reynolds' installation looks like a shattered room in a comic strip to be labeled with floating word balloons screaming CRASH! BAM! SPLAT! Just what has caused the explosion is unclear, tsunami, outer-space phenomenon or was it ray gun blasts? The energy blew walls asunder, sending sheetrock through the framing. Wallboards levitate where floorboards are expected and studs have settled like French fries spilled from its cardboard container. Surprisingly the wallpaper is unscathed by the turbulence just past, except for neatly cut openings everywhere. The cheerful colors and patterns suggest a [formerly] hospitable domestic interior and no feeling of horror is conveyed. A mop and some rags add an optimistic tone.

Reynolds designed the installation first as a scale model. The current configuration was born after several modifications, and the architectural episodes before and after the current scene have existed in the studio.<sup>1</sup>

The architectural setting implies a story, but the single, post-crisis scene cannot confirm the nature of any events either before or after the destruction. The installation portrays an arrested moment in the middle of a sequence progressing according to a carefully devised plan. Time feels suspended and the air has thinned to almost nothing. Ambiguity rules, especially as we see that the beams have deceived us. They are camouflaged insulation foam, cut, coated and painted to mimic the wood-grain of building stock. Wall-designs are stenciled directly onto foam board, in a scale out of proportion to the room's size. The cut-outs are unexplained by the pattern of debris settlement and correspond

neither to structure nor to decoration. The rags and mop are also fake, cleverly crafted to affirm our confusion. The tacks hold nothing together and all is not quite what it seems.

Disorientation is promoted by the cut-outs. They frame no view. There is nothing beyond the walls to see. This condition turns our viewing back on itself, and as we explore the installation we become the missing figure within. We perceive ourselves in the frames as a character within a comic panel. Each cut-out defines a panel and so the series improvise into a sequence. Although cartoon narratives do not need the human form, a man-made architectural setting presumes one, and as Reynolds encapsulates the viewer, the 'joke' is on us. The well-laid ploy triumphs as our senses are confounded by the perceptual shifting between the illusion and reality of the installation.

Some cues alter our sense of scale, especially the wall-designs, which enlarge printed origami paper. Stenciled directly onto the fake walls, they reference the authority of the small printed sheets, used for making tiny objects, the 'real' products of this popular art. Origami paper prints are distinguished by the even distribution of positive and negative design elements within the overall pattern. This equilibrium has been observed by Reynolds and its principle transposed into the overall design. What is ground and what is pattern, what is solid and what is void, and eventually, what is real and what is illusory is posed continuously and becomes the activity, like the process of folding origami. By experiencing the installation we allow it to become real after all!

### NOTE

1. Conversation with the author, October 6, 2011, Newmarket, NH.





## Wallpapered Space

E. Tornai Thyssen

Samantha Fields creates much of her meaning with the intrinsic qualities of the ready-made and the current configuration<sup>1</sup> gently probes dysfunctions of a decaying materialist society. The installation consists of vinyl siding, embroidery, and a plethora of knitted and crocheted coverlets, commonly called afghans, which the artist considers the locus of her current oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> The synthetic clapboards are pieced together to recreate a house's exterior. The embroidery is stitched directly through the vinyl, presenting its right side on the exterior. The design grew from an old wallpaper pattern Fields studied, dissected and then rearranged with a free hand. The new color scheme responds to the bright hues of the afghans seen through gaps in the siding.

Fields seems to intuit that the democratic nature of the afghan enables ready access to its multiple meanings. Ordinarily used to warm, protect and cuddle family members, every knot, loop and strand of fiber embodies affection and belonging. Handmade coverlets confirm family ties and encode power structure within the home. Although most families cannot conscientiously dispose of their afghans, many still find a path to second-hand shops and second families. Fields has amassed a collection, and while some came from family, most were 'rescued' from thrift stores. As such they each transpose pieces of others' history into the assemblage.

The embroidery on the exterior, and afghans in the interior explore relations between the inside and outside, the public or private. Privacy today is a vanishing condition and both social structures and physical frameworks contribute to its dismantlement. Privacy may be preserved

at home, although the boundaries that describe 'home' have become thoroughly permeable and unstructured, even decorative and false. The superscripting of hand stitching on the synthetic exterior is a call to reconnect our public selves to the virtues of the handmade. Fields explains that making by hand is becoming ever more scarce and humans become more definitively disconnected from the products of their own making.<sup>3</sup> This condition has intensified in recent years as technology rules every action we take, and every emotion we recognize.

Fields' installation challenges both technology and its synthetic product. The vinyl siding is exposed as a façade, an unsustainable petroleum product unable to stand on its own, yet grandfathered into the collective consciousness of Americans who continue to embrace its false logic. Unaware that they bought into the delusions of the system through embracing the falsehoods of advertisers, they reach for more of the same: knitting afghans in acrylic yarns, and hand stitching ornament copied from mass-produced designs. But Fields is not pessimistic. She believes that the act of making by hand is redemptive, and ultimately healing. Indeed making ornaments in whatever materials are at hand is a distinguishing human impulse, directly related to making art, as we make our world meaningful by our design.

### NOTES

1. The work at Montserrat is a joining of two earlier works, *Wallpapered Space I* and *Wallpapered Space II*, both from 2007.
2. New work was recently on view at the NKG Gallery, Boston, MA (July 2011).
3. Conversation with the author, October 13, 2011 Hyde Park, MA.

### LEFT

**Samantha Fields**

*Wallpapered Space*, detail, 2011

## Exhibition Checklist

### ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

#### ***Keeping Up Appearances:***

***The Mean Reds***, 2011

wallpaper, flexible moulding  
sound by Minor Fires

***Tea***, 2011

sand-blasted porcelain

### SAMANTHA FIELDS

#### ***Wallpapered Space***, 2011

vinyl siding, afghans, wood, yarn

#### ***Curtain Mother***, 2011

curtains, curtain rods

### KIRSTEN REYNOLDS

#### ***Being Done Before***, 2011

mixed media installation

## Acknowledgements

A big thank you to Liz, Samantha and Kirsten for your willingness to create site-specific installations for this exhibition. It is exciting to have your bold, thought provoking work on our campus and we've all loved working with you. I want to recognize Montserrat professor E. Tornai Thyssen for adding depth and dimension to the interpretation of the work. Thanks to John for designing another beautiful catalog. George, thanks for making the galleries look amazing as always. I am grateful to our student crew, Larissa, Zac, Devin, Bianca, Blake, Kyle, Grant, Tom, and Justin for all your help in making the pieces materialize. Maggie and Lucas, I truly value your contributions, dedication and energy. We are a great team!

**LEONIE BRADBURY**

## Credits

**Leonie Bradbury**, Director, Curator

**Maggie Cavallo**,

Assistant Curator of Education

**Lucas Spivey**, Exhibitions Manager

**George Peet**, Photography

**The Journeyman Press**, Printing

**John Colan**, Design



Massachusetts Cultural Council

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*Home Sweet Home  
Installation View, 2011*

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