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Contemplative Interiors: Ceramics and Furniture

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Kala Stein

James Johnson

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CONTEMPLATIVE INTERIORS

CERAMICS AND FURNITURE

JAMES JOHNSON AND KALA STEIN

FEBRUARY 6, 2019-MARCH 15, 2019

Exhibit Curator: Alla Myzelev

LOCKHART GALLERY

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT GENESEO

GENESEO, NEW YORK

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FOREWORD

STACEY ROBERTSON

Contemplative Interiors celebrates functional art through the work of James Johnson and Kala Stein. This magnificent exhibition invites us to reflect upon craft, beauty, space, material, and nature. It also inspires us to engage in integrative learning—an intellectual and personal journey at the heart of higher education. Professor Alla Myzelev in collaboration with two undergraduate Art History majors, Rachel Mihlstin and Abigail Anderson, designed and implemented this exhibition. They provide us with an opportunity to contemplate our assumptions about the meaning of art and imagine new ways of embracing creativity in our own lives.

In bringing together the work of furniture maker and sculptor James Johnson and ceramicist Kala Stein, *Contemplative Interiors* synthesizes different types of art and asks us to make connections as we engage with the works. How do Stein's ceramics and Johnson's furniture act as inspiring works of art and also functional objects we might find in our homes? How do Johnson's and Stein's work speak to one another? What do they tell us about our natural surroundings? The history of craft? The philosophy of beauty? The politics of museums? What can we learn from Johnson's commitment to simplicity and Stein's ideas about "the dignity of labor" as expressed through their art? In bringing these examples of functional art into conversation with one another, we are able to ask new questions and synthesize multiple bodies of knowledge.

As we ponder the meaning of the works, we might also consider how our learning relates to other situations. How can we think differently

about museums that privilege paintings and sculptures over more functional crafts? How does our own campus engage with art? How do we think about art in our own personal spaces? What objects have importance in our life history and why? How are our artistic preferences influenced by politics? How might we utilize our knowledge of functional art to impact our purchasing choices? How might we curate our spaces differently to inspire simplicity, beauty, and functionality?

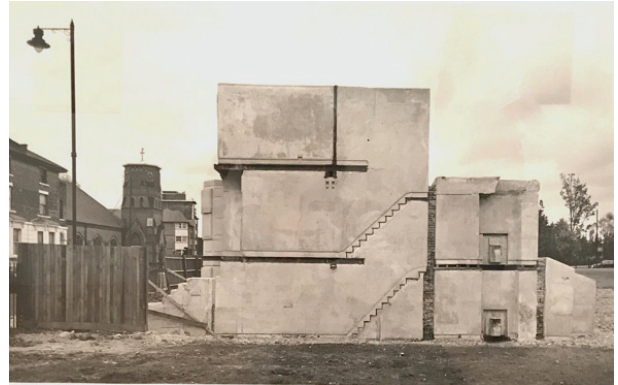
As artists, Johnson and Stein offer new avenues for us to think more intentionally about a variety of issues related to the politics of art and the meaning of personal space. Both recognize that their work serves multiple purposes—and, ideally, inspires us through beauty even as they provide us with functionality in our homes and workplaces. As Johnson states, the ideal customer is someone who falls in love with the pieces, "who engages with them and spends time with them." Thus, a table becomes more than a place to write—it a choice about beauty, about material, about environment. Stein's art celebrates the meaning of labor and she hopes that her customers are gratified as they live with her pieces of art, no matter the function they might play.

Contemplative Interiors offers us an opportunity to learn, reflect, and apply deeper meaning to art and craft in our own lives. In a time of increasing complexity, technological transformations, environmental challenges, and uncertainty, this exhibition asks us to ponder simplicity, balance, and beauty, in all aspects of our lives.

CONTEMPLATIVE INTERIORS: FURNITURE AND CERAMICS: JAMES JOHNSON AND KALA STEIN

BY ALLA MYZELEV

In 1993 British artist Rachel Whiteread decided to create a cast of an entire terrace house slated for demolition in East London. *House*, as the sculpture was called, became the centre of the culture wars between those in support of gentrification of the area and those who wanted to preserve the fragile social fabric of the working class neighborhood. What I am interested in here is not so much the history of this work of art and the circumstances of its creation but the idea that it brought forward, namely the meaning of the house. Both symbolically and literally, Whiteread exposed that particular house to the public. By creating a cast of the unfurnished house, stripped of all interior decor, she made it into a minimalist artwork. Yet, if one looked very closely, one could see that the work was not entirely minimalist and generic. Among the overall gray cement, one could find traces of wall paper, wall colors, and newspapers that betrayed the individuality of its inhabitants. The work then posed a series of important questions: What are we willing to show to the public? What happens when our private lives are exposed? The subsequent outcry of the media about *House* demonstrated how uncomfortable it is for the nation, city, area and the individual to be deprived of the right to have an interior. *House*, still makes us contemplate the topic of minimalist interiors and what constitutes inhabited space.



Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993,
photo Alla Myzelev

Interiors come in different shapes and sizes. One can think of interior as a place of protection, cover, or seclusion. In everyday life we often talk about the interior of a house, of a place that provides not only cover but also a place to rest and gather our thoughts. *Contemplative Interiors* exhibition hopes to expand our understanding of interiority as a strategy of living. What does it mean to be surrounded by things that are both contemplative and functional? What happens when the domestic interior becomes an exhibition in an art gallery? Can craft objects belong to both domestic interiors and an art gallery? This introduction will look at the works of Kala Stein and James Johnson, whose work, I argue, continue the tradition of modern craft in the early twenty-first century. Johnson and Stein are inspired by modern masters who tried to create sparse, simple, and minimalist-looking

objects. Yet both also draw inspiration from many other sources like their education, work experience, and mentors in the end creating objects that possess a subdued and restrained understanding of history. Both Stein and Johnson create objects that are domestic in their nature. Stein's work includes trays, plates, bookends, and vases while Johnson's work usually features functional furniture: dressers, coffee tables, sideboards, etc. The work of both artists is deeply rooted in the tradition of the American Studio Craft Movement. The movement itself grew out of the extended modernist movement propagated by institutions like Bauhaus in Europe that believed in the intersection of good design and improvement of human and aesthetic values. During and after WWII, the designers at the forefront of the movement, such as Josef and Anni Albers, immigrated to the United States and started teaching in larger art institutions. This led to the rise in popularity of combining design, architecture, and craft in the USA.

American Studio Craft Movement then became the movement of mainly those who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. These craftspeople both adhered to the minimalist aesthetic and believed in creating high quality handmade objects, providing contrast to mass produced, low-quality products sold in the large box stores. Some of these makers followed the minimalist aesthetic of international style in architecture and sculpture. The movement became an important milestone in creating the connection between craft and art market. The work of Johnson and Stein demonstrates interesting tension between studio craft stylistics, e.g. attention to detail, high level of professionalism, minimalist aesthetic, and simple geometric design. Furthermore

Johnson and Stein's work shows self-awareness and self-realization of representing tradition, but also embracing an aesthetic highly suitable for contemporary life. In this tension their contemplative nature is seen most clearly when juxtaposed against the neutrality of the gallery white walls.

In the case of Stein's and Johnson's works, interiority can be imagined as a series of nesting objects not unlike the babushka doll: Stein's work can be inside the work produced by Johnson which in turn can be interiorized by a house or a gallery. Each subsequent interior becomes exterior in turn—it provides shelter and is sheltered itself. Thus, it is also important to think about what architectural interiors house the work and how different interiors provide varying contexts to our understanding of the work.

Separating the context from the work is important because the works themselves are rooted in two interrelated traditions of art and craft. When artists, craft makers, critics, and historians talk about separation between art and craft they usually cite the Enlightenment as a period when for the first time arts and crafts were distinguished on the basis of their aesthetics versus functionality. Art, it was argued, should imbue pure pleasure, unadulterated by the functionality of the object. Only when the piece transcends the mundane concerns of everyday, can it be really enjoyed for its purely artistic merits, argued a philosopher of the Enlightenment. Thus paintings and decorative sculpture were considered to be more important as artistic endeavors, as opposed to more craft-based objects such as carpets, chairs, plates, and others. This trend of separation continued in Europe and the

United States until the second half of the 19th century, when British artists and philosophers such as John Ruskin and William Morris started their defense of craft work being equal to art. They argued that the enjoyment of the objects--both in its making and usage--lies in the honesty of construction and masterful use of the materials. Responding to the increased mechanization of the production of household objects, the leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement (as it became known) argued for the equality of arts and crafts on the basis that both provided aesthetic enjoyment. William Morris was especially influential in this regard. An artist, architect, philosopher and craftsman, he created the company William Morris and Co. to produce handmade craft objects for the consumption of the middle classes. While the movement was very successful and spread from England to Europe, especially to Germany, Austria, and the United States, the separation and hierarchy between art and craft remained. For example the craft of furniture making, textiles, and ceramics was always present in the architectural avant-gardes of the early twentieth century from Art Nouveau to Bauhaus, but it was always relegated to the rear. It was the architects, sculptors, and artists that were mainly considered in the discussion of visual arts and innovations. As a result of this history, most of the important, newly-established European and American museums featured mainly artists. Craft makers were relegated to craft shows, bazaars, and showrooms of retail establishments. With the advent of the American Studio Craft Movement, the separation between art and craft became even more complex when considering the robust Do-It-Yourself craft category that

included amateur craft makers practising as a hobby, though some with great skill.

The products that came out of the studios of the professional crafts people existed in between: they did not belong with the amateur crafts, nor were they accepted as art. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were numerous opportunities to incorporate crafts into the domain for contemporary art, yet the separation persisted. Since the 1980s, many contemporary artists use crafts while many studio craftspeople experiment with art and design. Bruce Metcalf, for example, talks about two prevailing lines of practice for people who have formal craft education: craftsman-businessman and craftsman-artist. According to Metcalf, more business-oriented craftspeople tend to work with design and mass production, while the art-leaning craftspeople create more one-of-a-kind objects that compete against mass-produced objects through high quality of work, material, and design. Yet, work created by Johnson and Stein demonstrate that business, craft and art can productively co-exist.

This dichotomy between art and craft has continued on and persists to this day. We still think of objects that we use in the domestic interior, such as chairs, as craft items in spite of the fact that some chairs could be discussed as works of art. Interestingly, the same objects exhibited in a gallery seem less craft and more art. The objects in the exhibition *Contemplative Interiors: Furniture and Ceramics* ask the viewer to think about why context matters. By being situated between art and craft and between domestic and public, they force us to think about the role of craft and functional objects in a world with rigidly structured hierarchies

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