

The New York Times

ANTIQUES

Museum Adds Illusion to Static Period Rooms

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Published: February 24, 2012

The American period rooms at the Brooklyn Museum are among its most popular attractions; in visitor surveys they rank just a rung or two below the Egyptian mummies. But after first-timers have seen the largely static corridors of 17th-through-20th-century interiors, it can be hard to bring them back.

To pique new interest, the museum gave four sculptors free rein to create “activations” in the spaces. The artists have added temporary color splashes and social commentary to Rococo knickknack shelves and Colonial dining tables for an exhibition, “Playing House,” that opens on Friday.

Mary Lucier, a descendant of Dutch New Yorkers, hung videos throughout 17th- and 18th-century rooms built by her Brooklyn ancestors.

She combined 1910s movie footage of persecuted Huguenots with a fake boar’s head meal, photos of her own cousins and skulls from deer that a relative hunted.

Betty Woodman and Anne Chu laid out polka-dot ceramic shards and bouquets of gloomy brown and black fake flowers in an early-1800s dining room taken from a South Carolina plantation, hinting at the shattered lives of slaves who farmed rice and served feasts there.

Ann Agee converted an 1850s parlor and den from Saratoga Springs, N.Y., into a sculpture workshop and store. Glass domes cover white ceramic fetuses that look like specimens in a natural history museum. Figurines of angry family members echo



Ann Agee's room “activation” at the Brooklyn Museum.



the sentimental statuary that upstanding Victorians kept on their mantelpieces. Ms. Agee painted the walls to create illusions of file cabinets, water pipes and cleaning products, without disturbing the gloomy somber oval portraits of the rooms' original owners, Robert and Hannah Milligan.

"I feel they haven't disowned me," Ms. Agee said at an exhibition preview, under the Milligans' unfazed gaze.

The Rococo Revival suite would originally have been lined in fashionably loud wallpaper, but Modernist-leaning curators had whitewashed it before it came to the museum from Saratoga Springs. The decorative arts curator, Barry R. Harwood, is now commissioning new paper, financed by the philanthropists Barrie and Deedee Wigmore, to be installed when the Agee project is dismantled later this year.

In a year or so centuries-old décor will be spiced up citywide. The Historic House Trust is developing an initiative called "Exploring Contemporary," for all its two dozen buildings, to attract new and repeat visitors. The art will be site-specific and probably commissioned from artists living nearby. "We're hoping each house would engage its neighborhood and particular constituency," said Franklin D. Vagnone, the trust's executive director.