

MICHELLE MAYER

Open House



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 8 - FEBRUARY 12, 2005

AUSTIN, TEXAS

MICHELLE MAYER

OPEN HOUSE

Although it faithfully reproduces the layout and contents of a house, Michelle Mayer's installation *Open House* does not arouse those feelings we generally associate with homes, such as serenity, comfort, and security. Or, to be more precise, Mayer's installation elicits these feelings only to gradually and systematically cast them into doubt. Our fantasies are indulged and then spoiled moments later. We recognize the material attributes of a conventional home, but instead of inspiring contentment, as we might expect, some of these details trigger a far more unsettling sensation, perhaps best described as the uncanny.

In an essay from 1925, Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny as the return of something familiar made strange through repression. The recovery of memories once repressed by the unconscious, he claimed, produces palpable feelings of unease, anxiety, and disorientation. While reading Freud's essay, I was intrigued to discover that the original German word for uncanny—"unheimlich"—literally means "unhomely," "heim" being German for home. (The title of the present essay is a play on the German expression "an unheimlich house," which is usually translated as "a haunted house," although it can also be translated as "an uncanny house.") "Heimlich" (or "homely"), on the other hand, connotes one of two things: that which "belong[s] to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, friendly, etc." or that which is "concealed, kept from sight." *Open House* deftly exploits the tension between the homely and unhomely, between

the familiar and unfamiliar, and this accounts for much of its psychological impact. Upon stepping into the gallery, viewers are greeted by another door, several potted plants, and a welcome mat. On the other side of the door, viewers encounter a dining room and a kitchen and, to the left, a living room; a patio, bedroom, closet, and bathroom await them as they stroll through the house. Mayer's attention to detail is meticulous: a set of clothes hangs in the closet, a vase of flowers rests on the coffee table, and photographs decorate the refrigerator door. These details create an atmosphere of intimacy and

relaxation generally associated with homes. Or do they?

In every case, these same details simultaneously draw attention to other details, details that trigger the uncanny, some in ways more subtle than others. For instance, it takes a few seconds for the mind to register that Mayer included only the refrigerator door, not the entire appliance. We soon become aware of the fact that the remaining appliances too have been rendered useless—no electricity travels to the range, no water to the faucet. Additional micro-simulacrum (or copies) are scattered throughout the house, such as the artificial plants that Mayer interspersed among the live plants. Indeed, the house as a whole might be considered a macro-simulacrum, albeit one that deviates from the original just enough so as to maintain viewers in a perpetual state of uncertainty. And uncertainty, like unease, anxiety, and disorientation, is symptomatic of the uncanny. That Mayer's simulacrum should excite uncanny sensations is not altogether surprising, given that Freud has described the act of duplication as one of several "events" that trigger the uncanny "in a particularly forcible and definite form."

"The factor of repetition of the same thing," he wrote, "does undoubtedly arouse an uncanny feeling, which, furthermore, recalls the sense of helplessness experienced in some dream-states." Not all of the objects in *Open House* are simulacra: unlike the stove and the artificial plants, for instance, the dining room table is both functional and genuine. Ultimately, however, this combination of



Progress. 2004, Ice Installation.
(View of *Patriot*. Oil on Canvas. 20" x 20" in background.)

homely and unhomely objects serves only to exacerbate our uncanny experience. We breathe deeply the fragrance emanating from the roses on the coffee table, only to turn around and discover a painting of Mayer holding a semi-automatic rifle, its barrel ominously trained in our direction. We examine, somewhat voyeuristically, the clothes hanging in the closet, but are shocked to discover just behind them a television monitor broadcasting images from surveillance cameras placed surreptitiously throughout the gallery. The viewer would find herself on firmer ground if *Open House* were just a straightforward house (or even just a straightforwardly strange house), but Mayer instead upsets our expectations at every opportunity, never granting us the privilege of cognitive certainty. Mayer's installation also activates what we might think of as the political uncanny. Here my own understanding of the uncanny as it is mobilized in *Open House* begins to part ways with Freud's. First, Freud posits a purely etymological relationship between "home" and "uncanny" (or "heim" and "unheimlich"), while Mayer implies that the relationship between these two terms is material as well as symbolic. For her, the home constitutes an actual site of uncanny activity. Second, the uncanny activity



Pussy Control. 2004, Video Installation.

that occurs in the home operates on a political register, Mayer suggests, and not merely on a psychological register, as Freud would have it. Finally, the political uncanny would seem to be activated when a collective experience or condition once camouflaged by ideology is brought to the subject's immediate attention. This experience or condition is not necessarily something with which the subject was previously familiar, but might also be something heretofore unknown, something stranded at the threshold of her consciousness—at least up until the moment that it is disclosed and brought to light, a process that elicits many of the same sensations (such as unease) as Freud's uncanny.

The political uncanny manifests itself most forcefully in the video projection *Anthem* located just to the right of the dining room table. Here Mayer employs a trompe l'oeil device. Pieces of crown molding demarcate the edges of a rectangle; the space inside the rectangle serves as a screen for Mayer's video, which depicts "outdoor activities," but not the kind we would expect to see from our dining room window. On the right half of the screen is a fireworks display recorded during a Fourth of July celebration, while on the left is footage documenting the "Shock and Awe" bombing campaign of March 2003. In pairing these two sets of images, Mayer once again forces a collision between what is homely and unhomely, here understood as a psychological as well as a geographical condition. Moreover, the visual analogy she establishes between fireworks and bombs lays bare the



Security Closet. 2005, Four Channel Surveillance System with Monitor.

(uncanny) ideological relationship between patriotism in the United States and deadly military campaigns abroad.

Mayer's is a house made strange through artistic intervention. As such, it hardly qualifies as a "house" at all, in so far as the house is supposed to function as that space from which the unfamiliar has been banished. This is why homes are so often characterized as sanctuaries—from work, from crime, from the street. Mayer's house belies this assumption, however. Indeed, the very title, *Open House*, implies that the boundaries generally understood to separate inside and outside, private and public, have been all but effaced. Yet this might not be the terrifying proposition that it seems at first. If, thanks to the encroachment of politics into the domestic sphere, homes

now function as sites of ideological warfare, they also function as potential sites of communicative exchange.

This alternate interpretation of *Open House* is signaled most powerfully by the video installation *5 Minutes*. Projected into an open suitcase is video footage of different pairs of hands depositing a variety of objects, from stuffed animals to books to garden tools, into the same suitcase. (The hands belong to Mayer's friends, who were asked to fill the suitcase as if they had been forced to leave their homes indefinitely, an unthinkable proposition for those of us who have never faced eviction, deportation, or exile. *5 Minutes* is the "document" of this collaborative performance.) The perfect synchronicity of image and screen creates a convincing illusion that is further enhanced by the fusion of three different points of view — that of the camera, the subject, and the viewer. These formal elements allow the viewer to "merge" physically as well as psychologically with the person shown packing the suitcase. When she steps towards the suitcase, the viewer immediately "occupies" the same position as Mayer's friends, and this experience of "standing in someone else's shoes" facilitates a considerable degree of empathetic identification. *Open House*, then, is indeed a house open to productive dialogue and debate.

Kelly Baum

Associate Curator, Blanton Museum

University of Texas, Austin

January 2005

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

MICHELLE MAYER

Born in Dallas, TX

Resides in Austin, TX

EDUCATION

2002 BFA, Studio Art, University of Texas at Austin, TX

1999 Syracuse University in Florence, Italy

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2005 *Open House*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX

2002 *New Works Solo Show*, The New Gallery, Austin, TX

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2004 *Cool Air, Hot Water*, Arlington Museum of Art, Arlington, TX

2002 *Disabled Environments*, Terra Cognita Moving Image

Installation Series CINEMATEXAS, Austin, TX

Hallowed Ground, Gallery Lombardi, Austin, TX

Harmonic Identity, Three Person Show, Avenue Arts Venue, Dallas, TX

Cock Y, Renegade Student Art Show, The Art Habitat, Austin, TX

Senior Studio Exhibition, Creative Research Laboratory, Austin, TX

2000 *Passing Through Walls*, an Art Exhibition Inside an Architecture School, University of Texas Art Exhibition Group, Austin, TX

1999 *Chain Reaction*, Conduit Gallery, Dallas, TX

The artist wishes to thank the following business and individual contributors for making this exhibit possible: 3M, 501 Post, Austin Habitat for Humanity RE-store, BMC West, EURWAY, The Front Door Store, GSD&M, Kali Construction, Salient Systems Corporation, The Plant People, and Puerta Bella Designs & Events.

Individuals: Brian LeMaster, Andy LeMaster, Micky Mayer, Martin Apolinar, Elizabeth Arrington, Judy Birdsong, Laura Pickett Calfee, Craig Chartier at GEAR, David Connley, Gary Dreyer, Sue Graze, Sid Millsbaugh, Mark Tillos, Laura and Jonathan Kennemer, Sumni and Preston Graham, Richard, Laura and Anna Kooris, Travis Aitkin, Marolyn Mayer, Toby and Karen Schwartz, Brian Mayer, Jim Mayer, Liza Hogan, Chet Hirsh, Mike and Michael at Actors Clearinghouse, Mary Miner, Charlie Parker, Anne Holladay Shires, Rebekah Edelbrock, Bina Reddy, Ron Rendon, Cynthia Ruiz, Beth Sepko, Barry and Betty Patton, Oklahoma.



This Panel: *Open House*. 2005, Installation view.
Cover Panel: *5 Minutes*. 2004, Detail, Video Installation.



Alarm. 2004, Detail, Oil on canvas. 2' x 9'

W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Judy Birdsong (Co-President)

Alexandra Wettlaufer (Co-President)

Lori Beveridge

Fern Santini

Elizabeth Danze

Jane Lilly Schotz

Rebecca Hudson

Hillary Summers

Lauren Levy

STAFF

Chris Cowden, Executive Director

Kathryn Davidson, Associate Director

Lee Bickerstaff, Operations Manager

Katherine McQueen, Programs Co-ordinator

Debe Bentley, Gift Shop Manager

Tamara Blanken, Preparator

This project is supported in part by the generous support of the Andy Warhol Foundation. Special thanks to BAH! Design.

Now celebrating its 27th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,745 artists in 229 visual art exhibitions, 102 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 277 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches

over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK
1710 LAVACA ST.
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701
(512) 477-1064
wtw@texas.net
www.womenandtheirwork.org

