

Conversation: Andrew Renton and Muriel Salem

Andrew Renton: We've been talking about what it means to make a contemporary exhibition or display in a domestic setting – a tradition which goes back a long way. People originally encountered and understood works of art either in church or in the house. So it's useful to discuss what we can do in a domestic, rather than a museum setting, in order to understand the connections that happen in this type of exhibition.

Muriel Salem: Yes, it's a process of choosing works from the Cranford Collection, which is quite extensive and rich, and then creating a story, leading people from room to room with themes and connections.

AR: If you're in a museum, the connections are almost always about history, and very often linear. There is a lot of that in the Cranford Collection, but what I really like about exhibiting in the house is the connections that result from many other factors.

MS: The relationship between the artists, themes, and even the physicality and aesthetics make it very different from a museum experience. Also, I think people find the proximity to the work very rewarding. They react to the art in a completely different way because there isn't a barrier between them and it.

AR: The intimacy with the work is one thing, but just as important is the fact that museums are not equipped to give you *time*. You're sent through a museum with invisible footsteps that are meant to guide you here and there.

MS: A museum *leads* you, whereas here you are totally free to roam around and spend as much time as you like. The experience of sitting down in the dining room and being able to look at a sci-fi painting by Glenn Brown while you eat a meal has the potential to last for many hours.

AR: Or months! There are several levels to this because it is a lived-in space. This is a strange consideration when you are trying to develop a public collection in a home that ultimately has a place in the public domain. You and I grappled in the first instance about whether or not we should even put it in a house. It was never envisaged in that way but I think we've discovered that intimacy and time offered to the public in a context they will recognise produce an incredible effect. We find that people love experiencing the art differently from the way they are expected to do in a museum. Because we have so many people coming through the house, we can see that they spend a lot longer

with individual works or installations than they do in the museum, because there isn't that expectation that you have to pass from beginning to end.

MS: There is no specified order.

AR: No. Instead, every room offers a self-contained experience and displays a series of different relationships. You mentioned the dining room before, which is a perfect place to start because it is one of the first things you see when you come into the house. Things are in their expected place, yet there is a whole set of contemporary art operating inside of it. I love the relationship between what you would normally find in a house and the reality of what is actually here.

MS: Little surprises ...

AR: And surprises! The art changes when you live with it. Here art occupies the space first and then you have to figure out how to live around it. You move things around to accommodate the art. It's not about your comfort, it's about a really interesting way of displaying the work. You mentioned the Glenn Brown painting, which is an extraordinary and ridiculously intense sci-fi painting. We've been talking about it for so many years and yet only recently did we have the courage to hang it and to think that it could fit there.

MS: Now it looks as if it belongs there.

AR: Is it because, in a way, it is actually a very traditional painting? I've always claimed – and you always laugh at me – that it's a landscape. I can imagine that people could become very comfortable having it in such a traditional setting because it references a familiar type of painting. Now that it's been up for a while, has your understanding of it changed?

MS: Absolutely. For one thing, you start understanding how Glenn works as an artist. Not just the techniques he employs, but his ideas. I find that living with the work and becoming acquainted with it is much harder to talk about than it is to experience.

AR: But isn't that worth noting as well? When you enter the house there is no expectation that you do have to talk about it – it's just about experience. The museum, on the other hand, is always evoking an analysed version of art history. What I like about working in this way – which I didn't believe was possible – is this idea of juxtapositions. In the dining room Glenn Brown is dealing with sci-fi, across from him there's Carsten Höller, who *references* sci-fi. He in turn connects historically to Rosemarie Trockel in the hall. She's an incredibly important artist from the 1980s onwards, who is reclaiming the territory of male-dominated art. She started doing knitted paintings as a way of responding to painting's very masculine history. In the same vicinity we have a masculine artist like

Georg Herold doing his sewn-up Fontana. That in turn connects to Rebecca Warren, who is indebted to Trockel and Herold and exhibited early on with Brown. There is something absolutely beautiful about how those dots connect, but as an experience it is just as satisfying. Again, what is intriguing to me is that when you put work in a very precious, grand, Regency house, you can include something as ramshackle as Rebecca's work because it plays against that. She knows that her work is always going to be exhibited in a rarefied environment, and it challenges the idea of the museum display.

MS: It's a curiosity ... A cabinet of curiosities, where the curiosities aren't so curious!

AR: On the other hand, you've got other kinds of relationships that are probably a bit more connected and a bit more historical. The main drawing room is a showcase of European art.

MS: We are telling an alternative story, one about European abstraction in this instance. Instead of traditional groupings, it might be surprising to see two German artists in relation to the Gerhard Richter, especially a younger-generation artist such as Albert Oehlen and then an even younger one such as Michael Krebber. One more step back and there's Raoul de Keyser, who is a bit of an unsung hero. A complete picture can't always be given through the expected, big names.

AR: Yes: add in the pieces by Wilhelm Sasnal and again it leads us on an unexpected kind of tangent, somewhere between abstract and representational. It fills in a part of this untold story.

MS: A museum has a responsibility to tell you the story as it is officially told. To me, a collection is there to tell you alternative or personal stories and make connections that you would probably not make otherwise, because they aren't obvious.

AR: Not obvious, but every bit as legitimate and the proof of this is when you put them together. Art is always like a push-pull, so it's possible to juxtapose the work of artists who don't necessarily agree with each other ideologically.

MS: Much more interesting!

AR: The viewer experiences the tension in that room between Richter, the undisputed post-war master of Germany, and Oehlen, who is now a very senior figure but formerly a rebellious upstart. He and his generation were adopting a very different position from what they already saw as an orthodoxy. What's very revealing is how those things work against each other in a very interesting way today. I don't think we're relaying a straightforward piece of art history because there are too many quirks involved.

MS: In relation to this, if you just go down the stairs, you find the continuation of the story of European painting, told through a stack of forty-eight Martin Kippenberger paintings.

AR: That's unbelievable: an impossible gathering of Kippenberger paintings that, in a museum, you couldn't come anywhere near touching.

MS: Here, you can put your gloves on and curate your own mini-Kippenberger retrospective! Everybody can play curator. What a luxury!

AR: In terms of the evolution of the collection, Kippenberger is one of the Cranford's key figures. Why do you think he's become so significant for us?

MS: I think he *represents* the collection. The spirit of Kippenberger is the example that the collection lives and continues to grow by. He is completely obsessed with art for art's sake. He is a brilliant mind, a revolutionary, and he's constantly pushing boundaries. He isn't worried about what art can or can't do, and firmly believes that art has a language of its own. All of those things that we are still quibbling over were never a concern for him.

AR: So are you saying that the Cranford Collection has a wild and uncontrollable character?

MS: Yes, but also one that has meaning and depth and integrity – all the things that I also associate with Kippenberger.

AR: The other thing that is great about Kippenberger as an artist, that we're not even close to understanding now, is that he works in so many different ways. The history of his relationship to other artists is something we've always been interested in. I think he is at the heart of the collection not just because he's historically important, but because he tries to mess up this history.

MS: Yes, that's what we do as well. Also, there is no hierarchy in what we show, another example of what I think the collection can do that the museum can't do. If you're in the mezzanine you look at the Carsten Höller Rhinoceros, then you look up and you see the grande dame: the Louise Bourgeois. It's fantastic.

AR: That relationship just gets under your skin, and for me happens even when considering works outside of the contemporary. For instance the incredible African carving, also in the mezzanine, feels totally at home with the Bourgeois. It is one of those quirks that occur by accident in the house. You can jump, not just in terms of generation, but continent to continent, culture to culture, and they all bounce off of and reflect each other. Take an artist like Franz West, another artist to whom the collection is very committed. What we've done in installing his work is to treat it as though it was

very traditional, conventional, domestic, sculpture. Instead of having it on a plinth, it's on a beautiful antique table. This feels very subversive and it forces you to engage with it on the terms of the house. In the last installation we had a Franz West sculpture that seemed to have landed in the middle of the room, as if from out of space. It made you ask: "What are we supposed to do now?" The answer is that you work around it. You live around it!

MS: And you *use* it, which is often very true to the spirit in which an artist makes their work.

AR: One of the saddest by-products of the art world is that when things become very valuable you get scared of interacting with them.

MS: The Mirosław Balka work is set up in this way as well. Balka doesn't make any sense unless you move in and around it. It becomes a sanctuary from the rest of the house.

AR: You are very strict about the sense that the house shouldn't be too precious, that it should still be lived in. That is one of the things that come back again and again. Time and again visitors say that they love the fact that it *is* lived in, because the encounter feels very real.

MS: People are very surprised that you can interact so closely with the artwork. For example, with the Hirschorn, people walk in and feel totally at ease with it in this environment. When I think that it took us days and days to find a solution to get it in, considering the fragility of the material – cellophane, tack paper, scribbling and photocopies stuck up very roughly – it's amazing that when you finally see it up there it looks as if it was effortless.

AR: And it's hung above a Louis IX Bombe commode! For me that's incredible because its relationship to where it's placed proves that anything is possible if you're sensitive to location. I never anticipated that it could possibly work in the house. It's a special privilege to have the time to really consider such a complex piece in this setting.

MS: Even if it were the only work in the house, it would be enough to consider for weeks. It's like a PhD thesis ... and at the same time, it is also quite a physical and beautiful drawing.

AR: Isn't it? I think that people underestimate that about Hirschorn's work. They very often encounter Hirschorn in a big installation, which can be overwhelming, but rarely think of it as every bit as precious as the fancy Richter painting. Over time you realise that it's a very satisfying object to have there. It's not just a history lesson in European philosophy and politics, it is a thing that you're living with in relation to other things.

MS: It's a bit heavy, but that's why the Jim Lambie is there ... to lighten things up.

AR: There are the black Sasnal paintings and drawings on one wall and then there is the crisis of twentieth-century European politics represented on the opposing wall by the Hirschorn. Jim Lambie saves the day by dropping his cube in the middle of the room. Of course, Jim's work, as irreverent as it is – a black cube with multi-coloured sneakers squashed under it – shows a total understanding of the history of art. It knows where it comes from. The beautiful thing here is that you can have light and shade in one installation. Speaking of which, there is one installation in the house that I think is really all about light ...

MS: Are you referring to the bedroom? I've been very happy living in this room.

AR: I love the bedroom. That was very much your inspiration. You really wanted it to be optimistic.

MS: You look at a spot painting and it's probably better than popping pills! [*Laughter*] I joke about that, but in a way it's absolutely true! Also, the Jack Pierson ... It took some courage to put "Pornography" over the bed.

AR: Or some optimism! But when you live with it, what sort of work does it become? It feels so at home there, and actually rather than any kind of vulgarity there's a lot of beauty in it. I think the great thing about Jack's work is the play between what the word says and what it is. I think "Pornography" is such a beautifully constructed sculpture.

MS: Ah, yes, and I love the pink neon.

AR: The bordello that is your bedroom!

MS: Actually, again, this is not only a perfect example of very contemporary art, but a deliberate juxtaposition that has to do with basics like colour.

AR: I've always thought the genius of the spot paintings was that they take a very contemporary position by turning art history upside down and saying, "This is all about relationships, but it doesn't matter what colour goes on from the next."

MS: Then we have three Gillian Carnegie "Bums". Do we call them bums, or do we call them punctuations? What do we call them?

AR: Punctuation is a great word. She uses them as punctuations, but when there are three in a row ... then we--

MS: We restructure how and what they punctuate.

AR: They literally turn the history of portraiture upside down, or back to front as the case may be. But simply, and regardless of the function of Gillian's work on its own, they refer to each other and to the works around them. Again, with the Baldessari, the colour decision for the works is very arbitrary. They are taken from pre-existing colour charts of nail varnish or lipstick. In a sense they are still all about painting, but push it just slightly further by removing the artist's control of the palette.

MS: I am also struck when I enter my dressing room and see the Phil Collins photograph. It is a very special portrait that I love more every day. When you live with it you start to understand how intimately Phil Collins must have known his subjects to be able or allowed to take a picture of them in this scenario. To capture that family scene – the artist Cathy Wilkes, her baby and her partner – is amazing.

AR: Intimacy is something we're also talking about a lot in relation to the house. It's weird, this parallel. Cathy let Phil into her bedroom. How do you feel about letting people into *your* bedroom?

MS: That's a good point. I feel they aren't just seeing art when they visit my house; they are also seeing my everyday life in relation to the art.

AR: When you walk in, you see a very eclectic collection. You wouldn't be able to say Cranford collects this or collects that. However, there are identifiable strands of ideas. For example, the Atlas Group/Walid Raad. The Dr Fakhouri project is such an extraordinary fiction, but on another level it's a reflection of the way we live our lives, the way that culture moves through the world, and the way that we move through the world to find it. Maybe it is also a reflection of our shared interest in trying to define who we are with the objects we come across. It's not an accident that Dr Fakhouri is making his European grand tour. If it were just about Beirut, it wouldn't be as interesting.

MS: I always feel that when you personally encounter a work, you have an immediate affinity with the sensibilities that are there.

AR: It is also worth talking briefly about the process of installing. If you go to a grand country house what you see in the drawing room is generally salon style, painting stacked upon painting. I'm assuming that this style evolved because, over time, when a new painting arrived, the collectors thought, "Where are we going to put it?" There was never a re-hang. What Cranford has committed to doing is to treat the house with the same discipline as a museum and to do complete re-hangs.

MS: The Guyton/Walker Coconut Chandelier has been one of the most challenging works to install.

Do you remember having to put outside scaffolding up, and continually dealing with issues like changing voltage because it was an American piece?

AR: Complete rewiring, new bulbs ...

MS: Yes, and people come in and look at it, smile and think it is just a simple bunch of coconuts. We were lucky enough to have the artist here actually sourcing those things for us. It also shows the generosity and commitment of the artists. I take our obligation to the artists, to show the work in a way they agree with, very seriously.

AR: So many of the things that happen in the house to make the work visible are themselves invisible: special structures, support, rewiring. All the walls are transformed to accommodate large-scale works ..

MS: Not only that, but also physically moving things such as the Slominski within the constraints of Regency architecture. It took six men to lift it and they all had to work on those narrow stairs! Also the lighting: we made the decision that spotlighting was not what we wanted to do, so that also needed an expert. We had ten meetings before we got it right, with no shading or highlighting.

AR: Also getting large-scale works *into* a house can be a problem.

MS: You're right: an interior wall might be able to accommodate it, but first you have to figure out how to get the piece *in*. Another thing worth mentioning is using works of art as furniture or light sources. I mean, you've got the Spencer Finch, which lives very happily in the house as a work of art, but also acts as a light. Often, people don't know whether it is art or design. You are blurring all of those lines. In the living room you're not sure if it's sculpture or furniture, you recognise that it's by Franz West, but you're not sure what its function is.

AR: That is really at the heart of everything that happens here, this thing about living with it. The artworks are inhabited by anyone who comes through. It breaks down the hierarchy between the viewer and the work of art.

MS: We've democratised the whole thing.

AR: The house as an artistic democracy. Perfect! I also think the possibility, that in a house you can have a very young artist alongside a very grown-up artist, or design next to art, is wonderful. All of those things are allowed to co-exist and maintain their own position.

MS: What are the works in the house that you especially like?

AR: As you mentioned before, the surprises. It is not just about the monumental work, it's the little pieces that you discover in the corners. There are also pieces that are very important to us on a personal level: the Michael Fullerton painting of John Peel, for instance. John Peel is my childhood hero. The reason I think about how art works, how culture works, or our world works, is because of this guy I listened to on the radio, under the covers, as a child. To have a Gainsborough-style portrait of him here feels very personal to me.

MS: I love, for example, the beautiful painting by Glenn Ligon in the hall. The experience of waiting to leave is transformed because you have this poem to read. Also, the Gabriel Orozco in the study, which we couldn't fit anywhere else somehow, now makes perfect sense. If you think about and move around it for long enough, it literally becomes a little icon that is there for private contemplation. You have to be very intimate with it to make it work. Then you turn around and see the Beatriz Milhazes painting which, even though it's quite the opposite of the Orozco, accentuates rather than overpowers the more quiet, smaller work.

AR: That room is an interesting room because it is about these painters who come to abstraction from very different places. There is a figurative Mark Grotjahn there, but in a way it carries the memory of the things he is most well known for, which is being on the boundary of abstraction, and paint for paint's sake. There is a space in the house for the materiality of it. To see the application of the paint, its physical nature, and, again, a play on scale – you don't really get that pleasure from a distance. Although, what can be equally frustrating is that, in the house, you don't have a great deal of distance to stand back from a work of art.

MS: But on the other hand, you *are* right inside it.

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