

# Mousse Magazine

In the Avant-foyer: On Decadence and De-facement  
by Sabrina Tarasoff



Joseph Holtzman, *Hammer Projects: Joseph Holtzman* installation view at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2015. Courtesy: Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest

*Sabrina Tarasoff analyzes the emergent trend that links domesticity and contemporary art making. A survey on exceptional places like Palais Garnier, Sir John Soane's Museum and Casa Mollino that creates a dialogue with the practices of Barbara Bloom, Joseph Holtzman, Louise Lawler and others. These artists use almost theater-like scenic tableaux in a decadent subversion of the superfluous, relying on the tropology of interior space to carry out a critical reconsideration of "the subliminal ideologies of modern visual culture."*

To indulge in historical hyperbole: of all the opera houses preserved in cultural memory and historical patrimony alike, Paris' Palais Garnier presents a particular kind of sublime that sticks to the skin like formaldehyde, preserving, over all ages, a sense of total—and untouched—interiority. Here, entering implies passing beneath a set of Second Empire Beaux-Arts style arches, where, greeted by the pageantry of bronzed busts, and feeling followed by the tragicomic eyes of masks hung against the aedicule, one enters into the avant

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foyer with a sense of already being anticipated. The conceit of gilded vaults, hanging nymphlike over slender mirrors, embeds itself into a blind, marbled arcade, which bleeds into the pink balustrade of the grand stairwell. A velvet-lining leads to an auditorium bearing scenes of symphonies upon its walls: their decorative function projecting upon the patron a premonition of themselves in situ, impressing a psychology sewn into the interior itself. By lacing his design in the indulgence of drama, Charles Garnier ensured that the opera becomes an expectant replicant enacting—or extemporising—the desires of his audience. Allegorised through myth and motif, the décor became a suspecting extension of its visitor, re-defining public space through an embrace of its more artificial attributes.

To those struck by the ennui of their daily lives, to libertines, bon vivants, dilettantes and demimondaines alike, the Palais Garnier presented an opportunity to leave the outside world behind in exchange for a totalised (albeit totally fabricated) interior experience. Like retreating to a brief tryst, it allowed for its invitees to indulge in an environment that was only ever as airtight as its illusion; where the conventions between “need” and “want” would resign to the senses, and moreover, to a sense of the superfluous. In fact, in Garnier’s design, the functionality of the theatre often fell secondary to its surface: the 7-ton crystal chandelier centred in the auditorium, for example, actually obstructing the view to the stage—its presence an obvious extension of the collective decadence of a society concerned first and foremost with taste, connoisseurship, and craft (not to mention great Gothic tales, following its collapse into the audience in 1896). This differentiation of facade from function permitted total withdrawal from the assailing ordinariness of the outside, substantiated through orgiastic indulgences of the decorative sort. Bearing an air of hermeticism (and whiffs of Hermès) it seemed, at that, reconciled with a sense of style already in existence—it’s inclination less innovative than elegiac. This stemmed, in part, from the architect’s desire to illustrate the foundations of modern culture through his work, paying homage to foregone myths and masters in ornate detail. By doing so, however, the opera became not only a sepulchral home for the decorative fancies of the bourgeoisie, but a way for Garnier to situate himself in the centre of their desires, as a new addition to the canon of good taste.

For Le Corbusier to then say, some half a decade later, that the “Garnier movement is a décor of the grave”[1] is not entirely incorrect, even if his haughty tone fails to recognise the potential of the affective anachronisms embedded in Garnier’s jewellery-box of a building. It brings to mind the bedazzling self-entombment by Jean Des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysman’s could-be guide to escaping bourgeois ennui, *À Rebours* (1894), or elsewhere, the calculated adornment of Carlo Mollino’s Turin apartment, in which he never lived, nor intended to. In both examples, the aim was to cast decoration, as Kirsty Bell notes on Mollino, “as a “consummate sign” of civilisation”[2] through, in essence, an autobiographical account of its conditions. Whether to aid with escapism, or in attempt to cast life as *nature morte*, decorative objects were extracted from the outside in order to act out a personal account, adding to the mausoleum-like extensions of each author’s selves. Though divided by what Paul de Man has described as the revolving door between fact and fiction[3], Garnier and Mollino, just as much as Des Esseintes, forged a relationship between history and aesthetics, with themselves as binding glue.

At that, “the superfluous,” as Voltaire has suggested, becomes a “very necessary thing,”[4] especially when cast as a means to critically reflect on one’s surroundings: a prevalent tendency in much of contemporary art making, or so it would seem, going not only by the amount of domestic items within galleries, but also

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the amount of galleries situated in domestic settings. It marks an on-going historicisation of society by ones tastes, and oneself by those of society, in which an opportunity is found to redefine certain narrative models of the self. In this, décor acts as a mask for its decorator, or art for its artist, with the “in-between”—the *de-facement*[5], as Paul de Man would have it—allowing for an intricate arabesque of fact and fiction to interweave. This in itself, as a theatrical masking with a recitative, often over-inflected style becomes a rather operatic mode of production, adding insight to the aforementioned anecdote. Total interiority, to cling to this, consists of elements acting out a sense of the ever-so-slightly heightened “real”, each object an aria echoing an absent author.

Bringing this closer to the point: the practices of Barbara Bloom, Joseph Holtzman and Louise Lawler often intonate in such ways, staging art almost theatre-like in scenic tableaux. The self is re-cast in carefully composed or selected objects, in ways which render ornamentation as a tropes of autobiography and self-adorn only to seclude, or exclude, depending on the angle you're at. To foreground, think to architect Sir John Soane and his house-turned-museum, a manic counterpoint to the composure of Casa Mollino, though equal amounts an interiorised, object-oriented (with no philosophy intended) epitaph for and by the architect himself. Through thousands of compulsively collected objects, all form-fitted into the townhouse on customised, moveable planes for excess storage, Soane built an inventory that attested to his interests, his research, his tastes, if you may, only to leave them hovering authorlessly in the air for future generations to take from. The result is opaque and breathlessly spectral with the “spirit” of (Sir) Soane almost over-stated, but only through imaginary “others”. The rooms (their décor as much of the grave as Garnier's, considering the amount of archeological finds) were pre-emptively embalmed in extracts of taste, ensuring the result of Sir Soane's physical erasure be a well-orchestrated and self-indulgent sublime, all doused in pathos and theatrical enclosure. At that, it is in a decadent subversion of this superfluous self-arrangement that the three aforementioned artists meet, relying on the tropology of interior space to carry out a critical reconsideration of what Ken Johnson has called “the subliminal ideologies of modern visual culture.”[6]

Johnson's remark stems from a review on Los Angeles-based artist Barbara Bloom, whose installation *The Reign of Narcissism*, first staged in 1989 at Jay Gorney Modern Art in New York City, resorted to the artisanale as allegory for the ultimate achievements of art-making, using interior display as double-entendre. The installation, a 19th-century sitting room adorned with custom-printed Louis XIV chairs, commemorative ceramics and a tombstone bearing the words: “She travelled the world to seek beauty,”[7] sought to self-eulogise by using décor as the definitive extension of a delusional self. At that, hers is a neo-classical calming down of Garnier's surface: a minty, opulent air b'n'b produced in an amalgamated likeness of a period room—historicising, in facetious conceit, the disengaged luxuries of her life as-of-then. It's an epitaph for taste that takes on a deeply-rooted cultural narcissism in order to empty of its apparent value. The marbled busts, the watermarked teacups all exist only as surplus, the remnants of when all is said and sold, which, under the auspices of big dick-billionaire art making at the time, and considering recent practices that have latched onto the unexpected potential of the superfluous, feel eerily contemporary. Consider, for example, Merlin Carpenter's recent “non-allegorical allegorical “displays” of high-end motorcycles, fridges and baby prams in “Poor Leatherette” at MD72; or Darren Bader's liturgical collection of rocks and mirrors (entitled as such) at Franco Noero. In each case, the attempt is to re-cast the self through a series of culturally identifiable and auratic objects, which in de-facement of the artist as collector, as curator, as connoisseur, procures a framework for reconsidering the role of the ready-made in art. The self is set in goods

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consumed: a step above self-expression as such, which translates to a delectable dilettantism tailor-made for the twenty-first century, in which taste has become a trope for value amassed.

Bloom's sight, however, is hardly set on the ready-made object as such, but rather on a totality evoked by things collected and arranged over time. The ready-made, so to speak, is knocked off its high-horse and forced to resign to a supporting role in a screenplay clearly scripted by an absent (and ironically mourn-ed-for) artist. A quarter-century later, in an exhibition Bloom staged at Gisela Capitain, *RSVP* (2015), the artist is removed even from reference: objects and fittings left as though she had departed an estate in haste and left it to recede into *palette-cleansing* tones and spectral visitations of by elusive others. This is consolidated, without question, in the writings left in each room: books by Joan Didion, Sigmund Freud, and Vladimir Nabokov lay cracked open on the sea-green souvenirs of furniture past, inviting the visitor to imagine their spectral presence. In fact, like looking at a Caspar David Friedrich landscape, revamped to match the domestication of inner experiences in the post-Romantic period (where nature is a sitting room and the sublime a crystal chandelier,) Bloom invites the viewer to a hostless event, in which the awkward experience implies imagining the artist's life as infused by her fantasy friends in the canon of literature, resembling—albeit self-consciously—the strategies of her 19th century counterparts.

The autobiographic is fused with fiction in a way that re-narrates it by giving into a necessary aesthetic distance between artist and their object of admiration, creating an abbreviated version of self lost in the delightful horrors of infinity, or infinite possibility—a Romantic gesture, if any. Joseph Holtzman, the delectable demi-god of interior design (appointed as such through his founding editor role at *NEST*[8,]) attached this ideology to the applied arts in creating an anachronistic loop-de-loop of historical styles, which would rightfully make even Alois Riegl[9] rethink his thesis. Doubtlessly less gauzy than Bloom, unless a blanket of poltergeists fit into his idea of an editorial, Holtzman unmade his millions by putting a painting career on hold in order to orchestrate what would become the most consumed and cultish of design magazines on the market. As OCD as John Soane, with double the attention deficit, Holtzman made a magazine that braided periods and movements into seamless cohesion (and impeccable style), whilst basing the endeavour on none other than his taste for the already existent and endlessly weird in the world—historical or contempo-rary alike.

Then, after two decades of publishing from his Upper East Side apartment, Holtzman finished *NEST*, forcing his “obsession-as-décor”[10]-trademark to change styles. It would revamp soon after as a resuscitation of his painting career, only to be first exhibited eleven years later, in a solo exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum, which later travelled to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. These paintings, all made circa 2006 onward, were immaculately surfaced sort-of abstract tableaux, made of profuse and thin layers of oil paint atop heavy marble slabs (sometimes slate). Each painting dealt with a different subject, a muse to be more exact, extracted from Holtzman's life: characters like *Mary Todd Lincoln, 1880* (2007), *Frieda Holtzman, with the Phases of the Moon* (2009) (the artist's mother) and *Jane Austen, November 1815* (2007) etched out of an “instinctual imprecision”[11] as much abstract expressionist as romantic landscape. The space itself was revamped as a 19th century interior—notably more “pioneer” than Palais Garnier. The walls, provisionally wainscoted in Goosebumps-green felt, were dimly lit for eerie effect, emphasising the architectural detail through a discord with his décor. Amid the eerie light stood a loveseat slipcovered in a textile rendition of Grant Wood's *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* (1931), surrounded by a few sparse selections, such as plushy chairs in anxious mismatch, and a carpet patterned with murky red curlicues.

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Immersed in more-so a mood than formal clarity, the works moulded with their environment, consolidating Holtzman's myriadic sense of self into a physical scenario.

For the heady, the paintings offer more than anecdote to indulge in, moving effortlessly from point-source reference to a poetic re-figuring of the artist's self in his works. Rather than portraying, Holtzman allegorises his muses through a near-hieroglyphic array of colours, patterns and shapes, using interior inflections (which is to say, a decorative touch) to characterise each one. Holtzman's mother is seen as an odd patterning of spoons, whereas Austen appears in a confused Regency style-dream doused in pastel and chinoiserie. Holtzman is never very far, as each painting, Romantically (capital R), "designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin,"[12] which is to say, each work is an evocation of a psychological place within the artist himself. The artist's inventory of "biographical facts, associated artefacts, and personal impressions"[13] assumes his likeness, speaking on his behalf like a tea-cup come alive. At that, there's a felt affinity to the literary second-selves of Bloom's left-out books: whilst these imaginary and real friends, and the spaces they are embedded into, all have continuous identities, in context, they lack referential immediacy in anything but their convener. It's a stage for the self appear out of anachronism, abandoning the viewer to the sways of experience and a total sense of the timeless, or: an interior décor not unlike the sublime. This is, of course, to be taken with a pinch of salt: his taste is a typified sublime, diligently voided of pre-existing meaning in order to experience the paradoxical emptiness of interiority. Romantic allegory, if anything, becomes a mode of production that masks the relation between artist and his object, or even artist and his epoch, only to undo some of its expectations, and add affect and imposition to the seemingly superfluous.

To tie this into closer cohesion, think of Louise Lawler, whose works, largely associated (like Bloom) with the Pictures Generation, have focused on the role of interiors in shaping our experiences of art. The contexts provided by galleries, museums, collector homes, storages, off-sites et al. are seen as not conduits, but catalysts for our behaviour, our ways of representation, and productive methodologies. Like Bloom, she eulogises private space by allowing it cameo appearances in semi-public realms, yet engages in a separation, an emptying, which is far more radical than a simply self-ironic interior. Lawler, or her prosopographical counterpart, is cast between "two realms of artifice—that of the mannequin and that of the performer." [14] Here, directed at a piece Lawler made in the late '70s, an image was projected from atop a department store onto the exterior facade of a theatre in Los Angeles. The gesture simply redirected thought: onto how the subject is theatricalised and staged, how this can be achieved with something as immaterial or flimsy as light, and how image is figured as representation in the public realm. Less mausoleum than morgue, Lawler stages photographs and objects to be examined, post-mortem, for the causations of their (untimely) classification in the system of art. The flatness implicit, whether projected or in print, thereby defeats the point of facade entirely, once again, emptying it of pre-supposed meaning: it's surface made even more surplus, like the dead-weight of commodity hanging limp in the air. Within this extreme interior blankness, pure facade, Lawler locates a NEST-like fetishism, directed less at a panoply of fittings and furnishings (though these tend as subjects in her work,) than at the absence of their apparent owners, dwellers and directors. Surface is put into abrupt focus: with no "decorator" at hand, the viewer is left to aestheticise experience, the fourth wall of a gallery vitrine, for example, becoming an affective enclosure that overshadows its societal secrets.

In *External Stimulation* (1993-1994), first exhibited at Metro Pictures in New York, Lawler put together a decorative array of crystal paperweights, each ingeniously embedded with a miniature work by the artist herself. Whilst viewers were affixed on the gem-like precision of these trinkets, posed promptly on pedestals

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the opposing walls bore each their own point of reference: one painted grey with captions allocated for each paperweight, and the other bearing a colour photograph of a collector's home in Switzerland. In the latter, two Ferdinand Hodler paintings hang adjacently in the house's avant-foyer, lonesomely left levelled with the fittings: an obstructing chandelier, walls painted in dusty blue, with delicate architraves framing doors in off-white, amongst else. Here in *Salon Hodler* (1992-1993), art is revisited as domestic fancy, in which the gallery functions as a desiring machine that attracts haute-dwellers and their decorative demands. The private is blown up like bubblegum to fit the conditions of public life, and encapsulated in easily sold objects made metonymically available upon request.

One wonders where Bloom would situate herself in this, considering her own interiors are carefully made inseparable, with hovering chairs attached to tables and affixed to frameworks that are hardly easy to untangle? Or elsewhere, how Holtzman reacts to such a radical emptying, leaving room for just image (of interior, like editorial) to exist as an associative consciousness in place of the imaginative? It is arguable that what ties these artists together is an attraction to the decadent displacement of self into décor framed by the 19th century in particular. More concisely, though, it's an opportunity mutually seen and felt in the critical capacity of ornament to impact the progression of cultural history. It does this, as suggested, through an attached opacity that masks and veils the underlying autobiographic impulse in gem-like adornments and implacable surfaces. Applied as productive methodology, narrative is re-routed in art making from the veering abstractions of the avant-garde to a total interiority found, perhaps, in an avant foyer. This motion halts a generational dichotomy that always separates inside and out, private and public, operating instead in the spaces between. Like wandering through the artificially withdrawn Palais Garnier, the self becomes a mannerist construct suspended in the objects of ones selection and the sites they are contextualised in: each revealing a desire to de-face the self in subject, and reinvent a language beyond baroque that would surface art from its invented depths. Allegory, at that, becomes the vital force of such an endeavour, underpinned by the *réseau* of things mismatched and latched together. An impulse driven by idiosyncrasy, no doubt, but one that defines the self through already-existing structures. At that, to adapt insight from Des Esseintes, who at one point in *À Rebours* parallels the progressions of perfume from the indifference of the First Empire to its decrepitation by the likes of Malesherbes, Bloom, Holtzman, and Lawler have each "revived questions of style and ornament in audacious antithesis" to modern ideology, sorting out and reviving the critical currency of interior space, that has too long lingered in the bad tastes of consumer culture, and "the vulgar distillers of its poems." [15]

[1] Le Corbusier, *Almanach d'Architecture Moderne*, Collection de L'Esprit Nouveau, 1955. p. 120

[2] Kirsty Bell, *The Artist's House: From Workplace To Artwork*, 2013. p. 167

[3] Paul de Man. "Autobiography as De-Facement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 1984. p. 70

[4] Voltaire, *Le Mondaine*, 1736.

[5] Paul de Man. "Autobiography as De-Facement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 1984. p. 76

[6] Ken Johnson. "Barbara Bloom: Portrait of the Artist, In Bits and Pieces," *New York Times*, 2008.

[7] Barbara Bloom, *The Reign of Narcissism* at Jay Gorney Modern Art, 1989.

[8] *NEST: A Quarterly of Interiors* was run between 1997 and 2004.

[9] Alois Riegl (1858-1906) who was co-founder of the Viennese School of Art History and the author of *Stilfrage* (Trans. *Problems of Style*, 1893): a foundational work on the history of ornamentation and stylistic progression.

[10] Wendy Goodman. "Grand Floridian," nymag.com, 2013

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- [11] Anne Ellegood and MacKenzie Stevens. "Hammer Projects: Joseph Holtzman," 2015.
- [12] Paul de Man. "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight*, 1983. p. 191 and 190
- [13] Anne Ellegood and MacKenzie Stevens. "Hammer Projects: Joseph Holtzman," 2015.
- [14] Darsie Alexander. "Louise Lawlet," in *Slideshow: Projected Images in Contemporary Art*, 2005. p. 115
- [15] Joris-Karl Huysmans. *Against Nature*, 1884. p. 89

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Originally published on Mousse 52 (February–March 2016)

Sabrina Tarasoff, "In the Avant-foyer: On Decadence and De-facement." *Mousse 52* (February–March 2016), accessed online.