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On View Now: Two Shows on Domesticity and the Housing Crisis

The University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum invite us to explore what lies at the intersection of home and humanity.

By Farah Abdessamad • 10/12/23 3:26pm

In a pandemic era, where the meanings of home have come to embody a shifting significance, the housing crisis continues to exclude and marginalize many. This directs to a timeliness in redefining our relationship with interiors—physical and symbolic. Two shows in Philadelphia and Ridgefield, Connecticut, do just that as they touch upon the question of what it means to have a home in today's world.

The group show "Moveables" at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) presents sculptures and films of five artists who consider the functionality of furniture and homes at the intersection of art and design.



"Moveables" (installation view), Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Photo by Constance Mensh

The show's layout broadly follows the floor plan of an interior, starting with the surrealist living room of Ken Lum. His furniture sculptures—large U-shaped sofas adjoining a mirror, for instance—evoke togetherness in shared moments of intimacy and conviviality, as well as a ticking claustrophobia. In *The Photographer or The Mirror?* (2023), the mirror's place is unsettling; it directly faces the empty sofa. What projection of ourselves is this capturing? Our sensation of space shrinks. A single ottoman captures our yearnings for lounging but it is so removed from the other pieces that it seems relegated. Signifiers of comfort become ones of unease.

We shift to impressions of nighttime frenzy with Nikita Gale's projector sculpture, *Private Dancer* (2020). Via the statuesque dimensions of lightning trusses, we imagine a sound that isn't there, a party that we enjoy alone, confidentially. Halos drum to the beat of unheard music, inviting us to dance and ponder on absence. What remains when one of our senses is removed, when we have a décor but none of its other living attributes?

Hannah Levy invites us into a reimagined boudoir, an atmosphere of kink and visceral desire embodied in creaturely chandeliers and floor lamps made of carnal latex, silicon and steel. It's thorny and chrysalis-like. For instance, one of the lamps resembles an envelope, a cocoon that holds a light bulb while feet grip the floor like claws. Others incorporate the shape of stilettos. Levy interrogates how furniture and flesh communicate in ways that animate the former while tempering the latter. Playful bathroom elements—such as a toothbrush stand—from Oren Pinhassi offer a glimpse into an expansive world, one in which a sculpture of an anthropomorphic character can also be a planter.

In "Moveables" we are invited to contemplate materiality and the taxonomy of what is unfixed, unmoored, and unstable. Jes Fan, who participated in the last Venice Biennale, brilliantly transcends the confines of domestic interiors to allegorically engage with uprootedness and foreignness in *Palimpsest* (2023), a film about how biology reveals layers of identity. We follow various steps of pearl fishing in Hong Kong. Poetically discussed, the oyster becomes a symbol of labor, capital and class. It is an invaded, altered space. The process of adding foreign matter—a parasite, an irritant—inside the oyster reminisces the journey of migrants having to encrust into new homes. Fan also engraves Chinese characters into the oyster and over time, they become nacre—precious. The film complements resin sculptures, stranded

jellyfish over towel racks, that melt like Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1931).

A little over an hour by train from New York City, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum debuts Chiffon Thomas' first solo museum exhibition. Thomas, a Joan Mitchell Foundation fellow who recently sold two works at the Armory in the \$25,000 to \$30,000 range and previously exhibited at PPOW and SculptureCenter, presents in "The Cavernous," a series of sculptural works and installations on displacement and belonging.

In two large-scale installations, Thomas makes a powerful visual statement about corporeality and disembodiment. Two life-size, hyper-real fiberglass casts of human bodies lie on the floor. One is face down while the other silhouette is turned to the side. Their heads are buried into two large dome structures from which a feeble light pulsates and glows. The domes almost appear as an extension of their bodies and we wonder what they see, what attracted these human moths to seek refuge in that light, into the confines of that protected space.

In front of the Aldrich stands Thomas's first public installation. There, he replicates a similar scene except that in daylight and the open space, we perceive rustiness in the copper complexion of the human figure that mimics the dome's steel structure.

Thomas, who recently moved to LA from Chicago, hints at the well-known issue of unhoused people which disproportionately affects people of color, the failed premise of geodesic domes as a solution to potentially increase housing, and so much more. The domes, and their replicas, which are shown in smaller sculptures in a second room and use stained glass and stitched silicon, evoke the membrane of a womb and a lens to other realms. In that second exhibition room, Thomas includes other materials such as cement which propels and elevates the sculptures as edifices.

With an Afro-futurist outlook, one can imagine the dome as an orb—a cosmic proposition to reconsider homes not in material terms but in spiritual ones. The human bodies are transfixed by the duality of an interior-exterior. The dome symbolizes a window, a threshold, a space that becomes part of them and which they sometimes carry like an Atlas, bearing the weight of the heavens on their shoulders. But the dome is more than a responsibility; it is nourishment, which Thomas reminds us when the dome is placed on and around the body's umbilical cord.

What's public, private, accessible, out of reach? A common thread between these two shows is how artists choose to represent abundance and scarcity, which are woven into the layers they ascribe to a home. In "Moveables," objects barely mask a lack of human warmth. Furniture pieces are relics, vestiges and hollow witnesses to empty dreams of commodified happiness. In conversation with Thomas's cosmic longings, the works draw outlines of a post-human existence and offer a social critique of modernism. Efficiency, reproduction and aesthetics failed to give us a sense of harmony. Instead of fitting to human form and needs, humans have been pushed aside by these distorted shapes. They require other homes.

"Moveables" echoes "Improbable Furniture," a show that premiered at Philadelphia's ICA in 1977. Then as now, artists demonstrate the malleability of function and form and design as a canvas for whimsical and fantastical imagination. They force us to discern social contexts and how these shape the boundaries of when a couch becomes more than a couch. Similarly, in Thomas's works, design is a site of policy failure and boundless possibility. Both shows point out the need to grant homes new and urgent incarnations of humanity.

"Moveables" is on show at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art through December 17, 2023. "Cavernous" is on show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum through March 17, 2024.