

REVIEWS

DESIGNS OF THE YEAR | SHANE WALTENER | THE POT BOOK | CATRIN HOWELL | GAVIN & TURK



Why three is the magic number

**the nature of things:
In the Artists' House**

*New Art Centre, Roche Court, Wiltshire
4 February – 15 April 2012*

Reviewed by Sara Roberts

A sleek modernist exterior has sprouted an organic accretion; and something unruly is taking place in the bedroom. The Artists' House at New Art Centre, Roche Court, plays on the notion of the living space, not just as a serving suggestion

for art in a domestic environment – though this is the rationale for the building – but as a model for Ideal Living: we could all live in a minimal, relaxed environment, surrounded by a changing selection of beautiful and intriguing objects. The current project further develops the notion, through enhancing the permeability of the house itself and turning it into both a living and lived-in space.

Three very diverse practitioners – Laura Ellen Bacon, Jennifer Lee and Hans Stofer – have been brought together to expand the concept of collecting, in a venue heavily patronised by collectors. The main house at Roche Court, a 19th century building, is also a family home. Here director Madeleine Bessborough perpetuates the tradition of the *Wunderkammer* by amassing a display of specimen finds for her grandchildren:

***Split Forms,*
Laura Ellen Bacon,
Dicky meadows willow,
large form, 5 x 2 m, 2012**

seed heads, a bird's nest and a petrified newt are accommodated in a changing domestic display, alongside great art of the late 20th and 21st centuries. Guest curator Sarah Griffin observes that their calculated proximity is 'typical of the way one looks at everything at Roche, with heightened awareness flipping between display, art, nature and accident'.

'Nature' has seemingly adhered to the very fabric of the Artists' House. Laura Ellen Bacon's woven sculptures (*Split Forms*, 2012) swathe themselves pendulously around its sharp external corners, altering its profile as they reach from roofline to ground. Close relatives of the swallow's nest in the eaves, these are nevertheless on a huge scale, and in willow: small linear units meticulously collected and massed into forms both weighty and clinging. You are aware of their encroaching volumes from within

the glazed transparency of the house, and there are visual correspondences between their massed linearity and Jennifer Lee's exquisite drawings in the upper space.

In the main living space, order and calm prevail, in the presentation of a carefully modulated array of Lee's ceramics and drawings. These are not working drawings; they do not reveal an interim stage of development; they are records of finished ceramic works. They function like portraits; the individuality and resolution of each vessel is analysed and rendered in fine pencil.

Lee does not make statements about her work, but surely the inclusion of a selection of found objects, organic and otherwise, from her studio, speaks of origins and influences. Here are bleached shells; pink-lichened bone; stones and minerals; rusted excavated ironwork; an oxide-encrusted grater. The evidence is in her distinguished display of vessels, with their speckles of rust, striations of umber, bands of granite, clusters of graphite. Angled rims and tilted shelf profiles invite contemplation of the interior landscapes of vessels.

Hans Stofer has colonised the ground floor bedroom space, filling it with his stuff, his personality, his story. It is insistent, edgy and energetic. Found objects are redeployed in new

object narratives, cut and graffitied, bundled and bound. There's a pragmatism to his use of string to bind mass, packing tape to secure edges, razor to slice through printed sheets, and marker pen to layer on further text, from dart to spear to plate to wall.

A series of jewellery pieces presented within found books occupies the long window shelf. Brooches and rings are constructed of metal and glass, presenting genuine insect specimens as if in a microscope slide. A bumblebee; flies; a moth mounted in the interior of a dried fruit; a wasp; a smear of wasp, all nestle in sliced-out voids protected by taped-on acetate. The book pages depict tragedy (a bird caught on a fence) and banality (the jewellery pages of the Argos catalogue). In Stofer's hands the resident architectural oak bed becomes a bed of nails (*The blood with which I sign this contract*, 2011); each nail stamped with his initials upon its heart-shaped head.

Other, editioned, individual nails are each presented in a test tube as a specimen for a collector. Here objects are collected and amassed, not to be revered, but to be altered and 'improved' and introduced to other objects, brought together in dissonance. Process is evident; material is delivered with a wry twist.

Sara Roberts is a curator and writer based in Winchester



A book of pots, places and people

The Pot Book

By Edmund de Waal with Claudia Clare, Phaidon Press, £29.95 hb

Reviewed by Shane Enright

I was delighted by this ceramics anthology. It is both erudite and playful. I hadn't expected this coffee-table book to be such a page-turner, especially with each page limited to a single picture and a short 200-word text. It's presented as an A-Z of key words – a mix of makers, manufacturers, methods, styles, cultures, countries – and the result is that we see *amphora* alongside *anagama*; Ladi Kwali with Geert Lap; Cindy Sherman next to Shigaraki. *The Pot Book* offers a kaleidoscope of ceramic culture through 300 idiosyncratic entries, made all the richer and more curious by the contrasts and counterpoints that each new page spread throws up.

The book's premise – the celebration of vessel-making across cultures and the

Right: *Stoned (Issue)*, Hans Stofer, mixed media, 16 x 12 cm, 2011
Far Right: installation view of Jennifer Lee ceramics in *the nature of things*



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