CHRISTIAN, JODY L., M.F.A. The Psychology of Space in Domestic Interiors. (2011)
Directed by Jennifer Meanley. 11 pp.

The work for my thesis exhibition consists of large charcoal drawings of domestic
interiors that are drawn from life. Many of the normal indications of living have been
removed from the rooms, imparting an uneasiness to the space and lending it an
uncomfortable psychology. The drawings incorporate a type of rendering that is often
hyper-realistic, which brings new meaning and content to ordinarily conventional objects
inside homes. Making these drawings requires much time spent observing a room in a
house, and this intense looking at objects enables me to see them differently, as they
come to represent something greater than their physicality. The interiors include a
perceptual kind of perspective that relates to my understanding of the space and the
challenge of conveying a small room onto a large piece of paper. Light is an important
aspect, because the absence of a particular time of day contributes to the mood of the
drawing and represents a continually present feeling. All of these formal components
supply a method by which I seek to communicate my relationship and anxiety concerning
domestic space.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SPACE IN DOMESTIC INTERIORS

by

Jody L. Christian

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2011

Approved by

_____
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

_____

Date of Final Oral Examination

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SPACE IN DOMESTIC INTERIORS

During my time at UNCG, my artistic work has changed greatly in its physical appearance. The work for my thesis exhibition consists of large and medium sized charcoal drawings of interior spaces drawn from life. The larger drawings explore a larger area of a room, often two or more sides of it, while the smaller drawings tend to be either a corner or one side of a room. I try to capture the nuances of light in the space and the way that a piece of furniture or other indication of living physically appears. All of the rooms are bare and devoid of the figure, despite the fact that someone is obviously either living there or has been there recently. This creates a psychological tension in the space, alluding to what inner anxiety may be subconsciously underfoot in the house. Hence, the mood of the drawings becomes meditative and quiet, but also emotionally volatile.

I choose to depict interior space, because I enjoy the process of making these geometric spaces become possible on paper. I am challenged by the process of mapping out interior space and visually analyzing it in order to produce a physically and emotionally persuasive representation of the room. The beginning stage of the drawing process is a long one for me, because I am grappling with the problem of figuring out my personal relationship to the space, which is then reflected in the way I draw it. I want this relationship to feel both materially and psychologically believable to the viewer, in the hope that the room will first create a visual experience for them, and then lead to an

emotional and intellectual one. I am interested in drawing's potential to transform an interior space by altering the light and the objects within it and creating visual paths and directions that the viewer can follow. The rooms are environments that I can control and orchestrate according to what I want the viewer to see, almost like a stage. The drama of my relationship to space is reenacted on paper, giving a voice to the unease and awkwardness that I feel concerning domestication.

The psychology of these spaces is important for me. At this point, I need the rooms to feel empty, and I include only a few objects that show the residues of living. I usually draw all the furniture in a room, but I clear off almost all the objects that may be on top of the furniture or on the floor. The signs of human interaction may include wrinkled fabric on a chair or bed, raised blinds, curtains, or one small object on a desk. The architectural historian Anthony Vidler describes the emptying of space in modern architecture thus: "If houses were no longer haunted by the weight of tradition and the imbrications of generations of family drama, if no cranny was left for the storage of the bric-a-brac once deposited in damp cellars and musty attics, then memory would be released from its unhealthy preoccupations to live in the present," (Vidler 64). In the same way, my removal of objects that signify present human interaction gives access to the memory of the permanent objects in a space- the furniture and shape of the room itself. Removing the distractions of every-day life exposes the most basic, underlying character of my relationship to the space. That relationship is one of contemplation and loneliness, and the absence of visible human interference aids in representing that.

Honestly, there are specific, very personal reasons that I am intent on home environments and causing them to feel lonely and anxious. My childhood was fraught with constant tension, fear, and sadness. The emptiness in the drawings gives a subtle indication of the feelings that I had during the first eighteen years of my life, and which I still carry with me. I go back and forth between trying to come to terms with my childhood and just trying to forget it ever happened. However, at the end of the day, I cannot forget it. As I wrestle with my memories of growing up, I am giving a visual metaphor for this struggle and my resulting melancholy in my drawings. I do not want this metaphor to be overt, because then the subject would become too straightforward. Since my own childhood home has impacted my thinking and attitudes so much, I have become interested in home environments in general and how they might affect other people.

Thus, my current interest in home environments and living situations in other respects has a direct line to my personal experience. While the drawings do represent my relationship to the space, I have recently been drawing in other people's houses in an effort to extend my investigations. I am interested in the anxiety of a person and how this becomes manifest in their home environment. I strive for a tension between the fact that the space is a home environment, but yet does not feel comfortable. Vidler's concept of the uncanny, as expounded in his book, *The Architectural Uncanny,* can help elucidate the psychology I perceive in these spaces. The uncanny is found to be the "absence of overt terror" and "the disturbing unfamiliarity of the evidently familiar," (Vidler 18). By

concentrating on the uncanny, I invite the viewer to ponder what type of person may be living in this space and the inner psyche that is reflected in their home.

Personal spaces can reveal things about the person who lives there and their domestic lifestyle. Since domestic environments are an inherent part of day-to-day experience, the way that a person arranges their living situation speaks to their personal thought process and other cultural, familial, and environmental forces in their lives. I am attracted to seemingly banal, simple objects and environments, because I think meaning can be located in them. These objects can be seen as the physical counterparts to a person's life, and the rooms in which they are located as containers for the evidence of their life experience and inner thoughts. I try to locate and draw not just how the objects physically appear, but the meanings that they can represent.

Some of the drawn objects stay in keeping with their homely connotations, but others seem to confront the viewer with an unease in their depiction, paralleling my agitation, and even annoyance, with domesticity. This disquiet often happens when I render an object with extreme detail and heightened contrast, by focusing intently on that object and giving much time to its portrayal. This process causes the drawn object to appear hyper-realistic, pushing it outside the bounds of reality, and it consequently loses an association with home and comfort. The object is rendered severe and untouchable. Vidler finds this quality in a house described by Victor Hugo: "Firstly, the deserted site, almost entirely surrounded by the sea, was perhaps too beautiful: 'The site is magnificent, and consequently sinister,' " (Vidler 19). Of the relatively few objects these spaces contain, I intentionally choose ones that can contribute this "sinister" quality, for

4

example, cloth furniture, textured fabrics, bold patterns, and the metal of lamps and doorknobs.

Each individual room relates to a different person, a different stage in life, and varying modes of every-day living. In this respect, my work can also be considered a study of people and what they experience in day-to-day life. In particular, the drawings presently explore transitory, suburban apartments. This concern initially arose out of necessity, because, as a graduate student, of course I live in a cheap apartment. Moreover, the subject matter can relate to anyone living in this type of space, because the objects and furniture are recognizable as short-term. This suburban character also emphasizes the uncanniness of its representation, because these houses were designed to be completely nondescript and ordinary. Consequently, the intrusion of the uncanny is all the more unexpected and presents suburbia as an unsettling, anxious environment.

Making these drawings requires much time. In my thesis work, the larger drawings take about one full month and the smaller ones take several weeks. That involves working five days a week for eight hours in order to render them as I want. Crafting a work of art over a long process is a drawing experience that is important to me. In a way, I want to honor the space by giving it careful attention. I want to illuminate these ordinary objects and spaces for what I see them as- repositories of meaning. Looking intensely at my environment, or someone else's, forces me to notice things that I normally do not. As I begin to analyze the form and light that is around me, I notice and appreciate physical space in a more meaningful way. I come to realize that the things we see around us every day contain a wealth of beauty and information that is typically

overlooked. I am fascinated by this idea of transforming something ordinary into something extraordinary, simply by choosing to look at it differently. The process of drawing supplies this different, intensely focused, way of looking.

As I attempt to replicate some semblance of reality, smearing and pushing charcoal around on a page is a calming and invigorating experience for me. I appreciate feeling less restricted about touching the work, as I feel more of a bodily and corporeal connection to the work when my hands are directly involved in the process. The charcoal seems to become something altogether different after I have worked it, because it appears so unlike what I had first applied to the paper. While this material can resemble the visible world, rendering objects and space in black and white does not represent reality, simply because we do not see in black and white. Since charcoal removes all color relationships, this material concerns the depiction of the physical form of the rooms and the quality of light within them. Black and white takes the work out of reality and into an illusory, fictional world, giving admission to the intangible and invisible emotional content of the space.

The drawing process furnishes a quiet time for me to accomplish something tangible. The act of rendering becomes meditative, providing a place where I can concentrate and still my mind, while giving form to my unspoken thoughts. In writing of the uncanny, Vidler found that for the romantics, "at any moment what seemed on the surface homely and comforting, secure and clear of superstition, might be reappropriated by something that should have remained secret but that nevertheless, through some chink in the shutters of progress, had returned," (Vidler 27). Similarly, the process of drawing

6

gives me access to memory, the memory of my childhood and of the higher meaning that I accord to household objects. When I look at the drawings, I see my inner thought process embedded in the way I represent things. The drawing produces a symbol for my time spent, and it can even be a way of marking a specific time in my life through the memory of a particular room or object. The detail can also give the viewer a way of delineating time while they look at the drawing. By selectively adding detail, I can move the viewer's eye around to different points on the drawing, rather than just having them focus in on one area. The viewer can then perceive a relationship to the drawing as I had a relationship to the actual space. The selectivity of detail relates to how we experience the visible world, because we do not see every aspect of a space in full detail all at one time. Instead, we regularly refocus on individual areas as we look around. By having the representation of these spaces mimic the way a person would see the actual space, hopefully, the drawings' emotional content is relatable to any domestic environment.

The perspective in these interior spaces also works to direct the viewer's eye. I have not made these drawings using an Italian Renaissance idea of linear perspective. Instead, I have focused on a more perceptual kind of perspective that still works to produce a naturalistic depiction, but that does not create a cohesive view of a room. When making the bigger drawings, I must use a large drawing board and easel that usually masks half of the room as I work. Since I cannot see the entire room all at once, the perspective becomes disjointed, one that refuses the single vantage point of linear perspective. I exploit this type of perspective, because I think that it is a more faithful representation of my experience while drawing. As I focus on different points around the

room, objects and walls can appear closer or farther from me than they conventionally would. I think these are important elements to capture, because they give drawing something that photography cannot accommodate- the process of physically observing space in real time. In addition, I often draw a space sequentially from left to right. In a way, I am reading the space, both to show how my eyes actually move through the room and to discover the psychological content of each object individually. Reading and then drawing the space in this way also contributes to the disjointed perspective. This amalgamation of views produces a fragmented room, stressing the unease of the space through its lack of unity.

Light is also an important aspect of my work. The majority of the rooms were drawn with natural light, and I am currently beginning to work with artificial light. The light in the space is a formal quality that informs how the rooms appear and the way the objects are rendered. Simply put, I like the way interior space looks in natural light, because it aggravates the shadows of fabric and objects. More importantly, the light is a conceptual quality of the work, as it supplies some of the meaning towards the empty quality in the rooms. Different types of light can signify different things in terms of living quarters. If a lamp in a room is turned on, the viewer is automatically aware that a person currently resides in that space. However, if no lights are turned on and the room is relatively dark, the viewer is not as sure of a person's presence in the house. I want this ambiguity in my work, because the power of the uncanny resides in its previously mentioned "absence of overt terror." I am interested in the tension that happens when one is not sure what to think or feel about a space. I feel that this involves more from the

viewer. It elicits their participation in the mood I create, and causes them to move back and forth in their interpretation of the rooms.

I first began using natural light in an effort to express a mood that I feel at certain times during the day, and, as my practice evolves, also at night. When I first wake up in the morning, I normally go into my kitchen first. I open the blinds and do not have to turn on any lights. There is a beautiful quality to the light at this time, but I often feel strange during this part of the day. It can be a very lonely time for me, and there is a sense of quiet, or even waiting, present. My mind has yet to be bombarded by events from the outside world, but I am still uneasy. This feeling starts in the morning but continues throughout the day. Hence, the drawings do not contain any particularities of light that might point to a specific time of day. The light in the drawings is a compilation of light-moments, rather than a single one. They serve to reinforce the idea of experiencing a space over a long period of time. I am not drawing the squares of light that happen through windows, projecting onto floors and furniture. I want the light to represent an ever-present mood that the spaces could always contain, much as my own apprehension seems always present.

This feeling of waiting points to a potential. Similarly, Vidler describes the uncanny as, "deriving its force from its very inexplicability, its sense of lurking unease, rather than from any clearly defined source of fear- an uncomfortable sense of haunting rather than a present apparition," (Vidler 23). It is memory that possesses this potential, and it is this that I am awaiting to reappear in my consciousness. This is associated with another aspect of the uncanny as researched by Vidler: " '*Unheimlich* is the name for

everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light," (Freud 26). This "secret" and its struggle to return is what I use to confront the viewer in my work.

Many artists have been important in helping me develop my work. Art historical examples inform my process, including medieval manuscripts and artists from the Northern Renaissance, such as Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin. The way that artists in both of these time periods construct interior space is relevant, because they contain many of the perceptual elements that I am interested in. Both of these periods contain artists that created interior space in peculiar ways, with rooms compressing at unnatural levels and humans and objects represented using hierarchical proportion. Also, the textures and patterns in these works inform my decisions concerning the detail in my drawings and where to locate that detail. While I do not want to completely emulate these artists, I find their use of alternate perspectival methods and rich rendering helpful.

This semester I have been working on an independent study in art history that covers Dutch painting during the seventeenth century, and in particular the interior scenes from this period. I am researching the technical strategies that these artists, especially Vermeer and Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, used to create such believable spaces. Through my research, I have found that Dutch culture in the seventeenth century placed significant reliance on sight as a way of gathering information and understanding the world. This conviction can be seen in the intense rendering that Dutch artists employed in their paintings. Their recording of the visible world gave the viewer access to knowledge and an understanding of that world. Similarly, I hope that my drawings of the interior world

around us can act as repositories for visual knowledge that lead to an emotional understanding of the space that I am drawing.

Edward Hopper is particularly influential for me, because he very successfully represented loneliness and isolation in his paintings. While Hopper included figures in his paintings, the architecture of the spaces creates the feeling that is then extended to the figures. The wide expanses of architecture that extend off the edge of the canvas create a feeling of indefinite expanse, often overwhelming the figures. Likewise, the isolated location of houses and gas stations, the simplification of the scenes, and the selectivity of human residue contribute to the loneliness of the work. Accordingly, his portrayal of the suburban environment is one of detachment and inner disquiet. His use of light also aids in the psychological content of the work. The natural light coming in through windows, both during the day and at night, isolates the figures, because the light is a force that acts upon them, rather than as a result of them.

REFERENCES

Freud, Sigmund. Quoted in Anthony Vidler. *The Architectural Uncanny*. Cambridge: The
    MIT Press, 1992.

Vidler, Anthony. *The Architectural Uncanny*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992.

CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

1. "My Bedroom, Greensboro Apartment," 2010, charcoal on paper, 32 x 48 in.

2. "My Living Room, Greensboro Apartment," 2010, charcoal on paper, 38.25 x 51.75 in.

3. "Studio Couch," 2010, charcoal on paper, 25.5 x 36 in.

4. "The House Next Door," 2010, charcoal on paper, 36 x 25.5 in.

5. "My Kitchen, Greensboro Apartment," 2011, charcoal on paper, 38.5 x 51.75 in.

6. "Isabelle's House, The Spare Room," 2011, charcoal on paper, 38.5 x 51.75 in.

7. "Desk at Night," 2011, charcoal on paper, 34 x 25.5 in.

8. "Isabelle's House, The Spare Bedroom," 2011, charcoal on paper, 35.5 x 48.75 in.