



A curio cabinet in the dining room filled with coal and wood, by artists Jonas N. T. Becker, is part of "A Tale of Today: Materialities" at the Driehaus Museum in Chicago. BOB PHOTOS

REVIEW 'MATERIALITIES' AT THE DRIEHAUS MUSEUM

New Chicago art in an old Chicago mansion



Lori Waxman

I really dig house museums. They're like historical fiction rendered as physical space, a portal into the lives of other eras, made newly accessible across barriers of time, race, class, gender and other limitations.

Sir John Soane's Museum, a curiosities-stuffed townhouse in London, includes an Egyptian sarcophagus around which its owner used to throw parties. The Ulysses S. Grant Home in Galena has no electricity or indoor plumbing, and plenty of hand-cranked kitchen tools on view. I am very excited about the imminent opening, in early April, of the National Public Housing Museum in the last remaining building of the Jane Addams Homes in Chicago's Near West Side.

I don't love the Driehaus Museum, a Gilded Age mansion at the corner of Wabash and Erie that was Chicago's most expensive and ostentatious private residence when it was finished in 1883. Built for the family of Samuel Nickerson, a banker, it was nicknamed the Marble Palace for the 17 types of marble it contained, and it was fireproof, a novelty prompted by the family's loss of their previous home to the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. After multiple residents and much deterioration, the home was meticulously restored in the aughts by the late philanthropist Richard H. Driehaus, who filled it with his sizable collection of historical decorative artworks — so many Tiffany lamps! — and opened it to the public in 2008. And there it sits, a monument to uberwealthy American extravagance.

About once a year, though, the Driehaus does something brave and thrilling: it invites in contemporary artists. The series, called "A Tale of Today," was inspiringly inaugurated in 2019 with an exhibition by Yinka Shonibare, the British Nigerian artist whose remaking of Victorian fashions with African wax print fabric boldly raised questions about colonial trade, minority bodies and good taste in the Nickerson's grand rooms.

Now we have "Materialities." Curated by Giovanni Aloi, it features the work of 14 artists and collaborators, most of them based in Chicago, many of them having made



Jefferson Pinder's "Gust" is a speaker cabinet out of which come the sounds of the past.

new sculptures especially for the Driehaus. That matters because, as the title suggests, the show is premised on an engagement with the materials out of which the mansion was constructed and decorated. Amazingly, no one used marble, but then, good artists rarely do the obvious. Instead, there is blown glass, carved coal, old wood, wild animals, dead leaves, copper piping, Chicago River clay and even some glossy spandex. What's any of that got to do with this old mansion? Plenty.

Let's start in the smoking room, where a Jewish woman such as myself would not have been welcome back in the day. Nor, presumably, would Jefferson Pinder, the African American artist whose "Gust" fills the center of the den, jutting out of the fireplace as if blown in on a backdraft. The sculpture is a giant speaker cabinet emanating sounds of the past, an atmospheric mélange of whistly, rumbly, carnivalesque noises, plus the voice of George Washington Johnson, the first Black singer ever recorded. Paneled in pressed tin and patterned linoleum

scraps salvaged from the working-class neighborhood of Bridgeport, home to successive waves of immigrants, "Gust" neatly echoes the gorgeous pale blue dimensional tilework that lines the walls.

I likely wouldn't have been invited into the front parlor either, and thank goodness, because I couldn't have handled its onslaught of fussy decor. Beth Lipman, whose glass tabletop sculpture stands in front of the fireplace, embraces that Victorian maximalism only to turn it on its head. Her "Sphenophyllum and Chains" is a still-life gone mad, a jumble of vases and bowls overgrown with the creeping vines of a plant that went extinct 250 million years ago; strung with fetters, half of it hangs impossibly upside down from the underside of the table. Because the table is white and everything else is made of clear glass, the effect is ethereal to the point of disappearance.

Sphenophyllum is one of the ancient plants that helped form coal deposits in Chicago and elsewhere, fueling the city's industrialization and urbanization, making the fortunes and

fortresses of Gilded Age families such as the Nickersons possible. Naturally, it figures in "Materialities," as does coal itself, in the form of wee animal curios cast from coal dust and resin, arranged by Jonas N.T. Becker in the dining room's elaborate built-in oak cabinetry as if they were high-class decorative art. Also on display are large chunks of shiny coal and gnarled oak, plus slabs of timbered walnut, mossy and rough, laid out as a centerpiece on the enormous dining table. As raw materials, they possess an honest beauty.

The return to nature continues in a room off the upstairs ballroom, where three artist books by Barbara Cooper seem to want to go back to being trees. The interiors of "Unbound" are pages recycled from discarded drawings and notebooks; the exteriors are covers cased from veneer scraps. Dense and organic, their legibility is botanical rather than textual, like how one reads tree rings and whorls. In the quarters of the Nickerson's daughter-in-law, Laleh Motlagh has fashioned an imitation Persian rug by pressing dried leaves, collected from the



"Decorum," made of overstuffed spandex and pantyhose, is one of four sculptures by Bobbi Meier.

Driehaus garden and her family home in Iran, into the hollowed-out spaces between two large sheets of acrylic. Semi-transparent and floating a few inches off the ground, "Threaded Memories" is like the ghost of a carpet that once covered the floor at the foot of Adelaide Nickerson's bed.

Such haunting happens throughout "Materialities": Pinder's sounds are those of yesteryear, Lipman's glass-festooned table stands just where a table did in 1883, Becker's walnut slabs are what the dining table once was. Meanwhile, in the former hunting trophy room, Olivia Block has brought the wild animals back to life. "Lowland" features solarized audio and video footage of moose, bison, deer and other creatures, projected onto the wallpaper as if they were clamoring around, not only no longer dead, but also on land still wild enough to allow them free passage.

Some of the artists in "Materialities" fully embrace the mansion and its quirks. Edra Soto installs a trio of pillars as grand and ornamental as anything the Nickersons fancied, only her aesthetic runs modernist and tropical, featuring patterns based on those of her native Puerto Rico. Petra Bachmaier and Sean Gallero, who collaborate as Luftwerk, assembled a sort

of upside-down chandelier, a minimalist version of the dozens that hang throughout the building. Theirs sits on the ground, just bare bulbs screwed into the ends of copper piping strung with wires, powering through a wondrous cycle of dimming and illumination, conjuring electricity's arrival to the Marble Palace long ago. Across the hall, a quartet of biomorphic sculptures by Bobbi Meier have settled into Mrs. Nickerson's jewel box of a sitting room. Fashioned from pantyhose and spandex stuffed to bursting, they are voluptuous and grotesque, swallowing up the side tables on which they perch, like ladies who lunch too much.

It's tempting to wonder if the Nickersons would have liked "Materialities." They were voracious collectors of 19th century Western paintings, Japanese netsuke, Chinese jades and Indian jewelry, and donated more than 1,300 items to the Art Institute before leaving Chicago for the East Coast in 1900. To the great credit of Aloi and his chosen artists, I very much doubt it.

"A Tale of Today: Materialities" runs through April 27 at the Driehaus Museum, 50 E. Erie St., 312-482-8933, driehausmuseum.org/exhibition/materialities

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