

Second Look: Sarah Munro

Curated & Written by Taylor Davison

The domestic sphere hangs precariously between the personal and the societal. At once an expression of individual taste and cultural trends, the way we decorate our homes reveals, perhaps more acutely than any other artistic endeavor, the hopes and fears of our age. In this collection of works, artist Sarah Munro manipulates and decontextualizes images of domestic decoration, demanding consideration of the meaning imbedded in these objects.

This is all new territory for Munro, who is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Western Ontario. Thematically, Munro's interest in interior decoration grew out of observing her peers as they became first-time homeowners, filling their houses with curiously similar items that they bought at the nearest big-box store. What motivates these specific (and monotonous) choices in furniture, wall colour and décor? Why do we willingly embrace poorly made, mass-produced goods? These questions haunt Munro's work, forcing the viewer to confront the decorative choices that are often made without a second thought.

Materially, Munro's work has shifted together with her new thematic considerations. Her process is simple. Inspired by artists such as Hannah Hock and Richard Hamilton, Munro sifts through dusty library books in search of black and white images of domestic decoration. She scans these images, transforming and collaging them using Photoshop. However simple, though, Munro's methods are deliberate. "I use Xerox and inkjet printed images," Munro says. "I see using the photocopier as the perfect illustration of my developing thesis. This machine is commonly found in offices but is also associated with do-it-yourself zine culture and wheat paste graffiti. It is an inexpensive image-maker that is suitable for mass production." Munro's use of throwaway materials parallels the culture of throwaway design she seeks to explore.

In her series *Inherited Vessels*, Munro collages images of ceramic bowls, stacking one on top of the other to create new forms. "I felt as if I inherited the original forms and transformed them into something completely new," says Munro. "I am breathing new life into the empty vessels by inserting them into one another and liberating them from their forgotten pages." Munro dissects and resurrects decades-old decorative objects whose undulating silhouettes, when looked at closely, tell both of their history and their place in contemporary design. These piles of stacked ceramics also indicate the sheer quantity of objects available to Munro; a stark reminder of the culture of consumerism that has fueled the production of decorative arts for more than a century.

Cut up and flipped on their sides, bedroom and kitchen showrooms are almost unrecognizable in *Showroom #1* and *#2*. The images' negative space disorients the viewer, and it takes a moment before the outline of a chair, or the chain of a hanging lamp, come into focus. Another moment still is needed to decipher the subject of the black and white image Munro has dissected: a bedroom showroom in *#1* and a kitchen showroom in *#2*. Every glance at these images reveals something new. Like the ceramic assemblages that comprise *Inherited Vessels*, the visual layers in *Showroom #1* and *#2* force a second, even third and fourth look in order to make sense of the image. Munro's technique forces consideration of domestic objects, objects which seem mundane and even inconsequential, in turn inviting a reading of the cultural meanings these objects carry.

Perhaps Munro's most poignant work, *Live Laugh Love* unambiguously juxtaposes an historic interior with contemporary decorative trends. This piece is a collection of contrasts: a white canvas sporting the twenty-first century middle class cliché "Live Laugh Love" awkwardly floats on the wall of a nineteenth century interior. In the original black and white photograph you can find, ironically, neither pure black nor white, but a spectrum of soft, atmospheric greys. By contrast, the blinding white of the inserted canvas seems to glow like a neon sign, garish and kitschy. Munro highlights the trendy mantra that has found its way on to coffee mugs, t-shirts and notebooks. But has anyone ever stopped to consider *why*? In *Live Laugh Love*, Munro asks the viewer to do exactly that.

As she advances into the second year of her MFA, Munro hopes to broaden her material horizons. "I am tentatively making sculptures," Munro says. "In my second year in the program I really want to utilize my access to the facilities affectively and challenge myself to make anything that is 3-dimensional." Still, the theme of Munro's work persists as she finds herself next in line to make the decorative decisions whose repercussions will be felt at a personal and generational level. As Munro elevates images of decorative objects to the level of fine art in her works on paper, she demonstrates the importance of considering the domestic sphere as a place where meaning is made; a space that demands a second look.

Bios

Sarah Munro's work currently investigates the blurred lines between fine art, craft and domestic décor. Originally from London, Ontario, Sarah Munro received her BFA from OCAD University, and is currently an MFA candidate at The University of Western Ontario.

Taylor Davison is currently finishing her MA in Art History at the University of Western Ontario. Her research focuses on late nineteenth century decorative art, specifically the domestic textiles of William Morris. Davison aspires to a career in arts education.