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Now Showing | 'Playing House'

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Betty Woodman installed her work "Various Objects" in the Cupola House as part of the exhibition "Playing House" at the Brooklyn Museum. Brooklyn Museum, courtesy of the artist and Salon 94 Gallery

For the exhibition "Playing House," which opens tomorrow at the Brooklyn Museum and runs through Aug. 26, four artists — Betty Woodman, Anne Chu, Ann Agee and Mary Lucier — were asked to insert site-specific works into eight of the museum's 23 period rooms. The project grew out of Woodman's observation that it's impossible to enter the past except by appropriating it, through "make believe" or by "playing house."

So, for example, in the blue-painted paneled hall (as multipurpose living-entertaining

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rooms were called then) of the 18th-century Cupola House, which was built in Edenton, Va., Woodman filled the dining table and cupboard with the colorful porcelain cups, saucers and vases that she has been designing for over 20 years at the Sèvres factory in France. Woodman’s pieces are the contemporary equivalent of the French porcelain that might have been in the house when it was built.

In the Moorish Smoking Room, an 1880s Manhattan extravaganza that once belonged to John D. Rockefeller, and which was a product of the still-new profession of interior design, Chu exploits the space’s exoticism by introducing a vulture made of wire covered with an embroidered cloth, and an arrangement of fabric flowers in a ceramic vase.

The library and parlor of the mid-19th-century Milligan House, from Saratoga Springs, N.Y., are occupied — in every sense of the word — by Agee, who tramples playfully over their Victorian grandeur with her installation “Agee MFG Co. Brooklyn Outlet Store.” In the rooms, she inserts colorful murals of an industrial-looking contemporary workshop that evokes the humbler live-work spaces of artisans and laborers (not to mention artists). She also fills them with her own figurines and vases, which allude to the period ceramics in the rooms but are glazed in white to contrast with them.



Ann Agee’s “Agee MFG Co. Brooklyn Outlet Store” fills the library and parlor of the Milligan House. Courtesy the artist and Locks Gallery, with special thanks to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship.

Finally, Lucier's interventions in the 17th-century Jan Martense Schenck House and the 18th-century Nicholas Schenck House, both of which were built in Brooklyn, ask viewers to consider their origins by exploring the artist's own descent from Dutch and Huguenot settlers, in particular Sarah Rapalje, the first European child born (in 1625) in New Netherland. In addition to several videos, Lucier also presents her version of a 17th-century Dutch still life, rendered in plaster.