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LOS ANGELES

"DESIGNS FOR LIVING"

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

How refreshing to see this sharp arrangement of bright, crisp, confident recent photographs by Laurie Simmons, Sarah Charlesworth, and Louise Lawler—redolent of '80s smarts and deployed here to consider the domestic and its complex nexus of psychic, social, and spatial concerns. "Designs for Living" gives weight to both "design" and "living," looking at how the constructed (curated, designed) nature of familial environments is reflected in and through choice of furniture and upholstery, wallpaper and paint colors, arrangements of collectibles and artworks; and how it's possible to trace, through the erotic life of objects, some aspects of those who make and live with them.

Simmons's new series of photographs began after someone gave her *The Instant Decorator* by Frances Joslin Gold, a do-it-yourself home-design planner from 1976. Outline drawings on transparent acetate of the rooms and furnishings of an imaginary house allow the homemaker to test out her creative bent (home economics as artistry) with swatches of fabric and wallpaper. The clean, empty lines of the little rooms suggest a streamlined, minimal aesthetic, but when—to produce these photos—Simmons tries it out herself, we get a crazy quilt of knick-knacks, patterns, and themes. The template-rooms and any actual fabric that might be placed within to "see how it looked" are of totally different scales, but this proved only to be productive for the artist. In *The Instant Decorator* (*Wood*

Paneled Den), 2001, the gray twill that "upholsters" an armchair and a gauzy, dotted swatch "rug" skew the way the room refers and what takes importance over what. Butterfly collections, candy boxes, and stacks of books that make up the "collaged" wall of collectibles are as much portraits of someone (the homemaker? Simmons?) as is the "photograph" of Queen Elizabeth II nearby. While these photographs at first suggest collage, their seamless surfaces negate this and suture a roiling hodgepodge to domestic tranquillity.

Looking like illustrations from a child's primer on the symbolic, Charlesworth's pictures float objects (a teapot, a bowl of fruit, a candle) in fields of vibrant monochrome: giant psychic flash cards of the domestic genteel. Her totems contain and reveal the psychic potential of the objects in Simmons's and Lawler's photos while also serving to signal the differences among the artists. In a room that held Charlesworth's *Fire*, 2002, a picture of a blazing hearth; Simmons's *The Instant Decorator* (*Beige Living Room*), 2001, where a couple dances while another woman watches at the fire; and Lawler's *Cheminée*, 2003, an arrangement of a collector's art choices on a mantelpiece, it was the Lawler that produced the most referential, aesthetic, and intellectual heat. Her references crackled and shifted as quickly as the periods represented by the mantel's *objets*—a chunk of Roman frieze, a porcelain Saint Sebastian, a bit of possibly Cycladic sculpture, an intense little Basquiat, and a figurine of a couple in love. *Cheminée* deranges any simple art-historical narrative: It refers to an Atget *interieur parisien* just as readily as to the *Atgets* of Lawler's sometime collaborator

Sherrie Levine. As much as the picture portrays the collector who had the fire lit and arranged the items (i.e., his or her decorating decisions), it's also a portrait of the artists who made those *objets* and, perhaps even more strangely, a portrait of Atget and Levine, of Levine as Atget—in other words, it's an uncanny rephotograph without being one. What warms art's heart and hearth remains family connections and history.

A bonus work by Lawler, displayed apart from the rest of the exhibition, nonetheless brought the ramifications of the domestic to a fine point. The largest photo on view, whose size recalls, say, a Goya, *Drop Bush Not Bombs*, 2001/2003, shows a netted, interconnected lacing of colorful lines (the bottom of Sol LeWitt's *Drawing #243*) abutting a dull gray carpet. Made at the Fondation Yvon Lambert (*vive la France!*), the work demonstrated the potential of the domestic as allegory of the national—and how the rule of the home front needs a drastic redecoration.

—Bruce Hainley



Louise Lawler, *Cheminée*, 2003, color photograph, 30 x 24 1/2". From "Designs for Living."