

## Reflections on One Story Among Many: *Memories of the Future III* (2018)

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Many historic houses have come to be museums, in part because they (physically) stood the test of time. This is, of course, an oversimplification. Countless hours of advocacy and labour go into preserving a building and more hours still are required to open such a space to the public as a museum. Yet, that first stage of preservation begins with a building: an old structure, often in need of a complete restoration after living many lives (sometimes with as many floor plans) in the interim years. Despite these conditions, a community considers the residence a valuable tribute to their past. In Canada, these architectural monuments are most often from the mid-nineteenth century and are usually two-story homes with a connection to a little-known middle- or upper-middle-class patriarch and his family.<sup>1</sup>

The Roedde House Museum follows this pattern. Records identify Gustav Roedde as one of the City of Vancouver's first bookbinders, who was recognized for his paper marbling technique. The house is designated by the City of Vancouver as an architecturally noteworthy example of the Queen Anne Revival style, which was developed in Britain and subsequently traveled to North America. The style has very little connection to the English architecture popular during the actual Queen Anne's rule (1702–14), and instead intermixes vague historical features, such as bay windows, balustrades, and turrets, into an asymmetrical and picturesque aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> The Roedde House, located in current-day Vancouver's West End, was built in an area that for millennia was forested land, lived and traveled on by Indigenous peoples of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), xʷməθkʷəʔəm (Musqueam) and səliłwətaʔt (Tsleil-Waututh) nations. In 1890,

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only three years before the house's construction, the area was clearcut to make way for the development of an upper-middle-class settler neighbourhood, to be populated by arrivals on the newly completed Canadian Pacific Railway.



Robert Hengeveld, *Sightlines*, 2014, installation view of *Memories of the Future* (2014). Photo: Toni Hafkenschied.

It is a generally familiar story, and from these kinds of starting places, house museums build official histories that serve as “repositories of the *already known*.”<sup>3</sup> Buildings, just like objects or works of art in museums and galleries, reveal much about current and historic values, systems,

and power structures. What is present—and, more importantly, what is *missing*—speaks volumes.

This account of practice focuses on the Roedde House as a site for the third iteration of *Memories of the Future*. This curatorial project aimed attention at the systems of preservation, collection, and display in Canadian house museums by questioning which stories we tell and why. Cultural theorist Tony Bennett describes how museums “are places of telling, and telling again, the stories of *our time*”<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added). *Memories of the Future* asked: whose stories are “our” stories? The framework for this project was conceived and developed collaboratively with Toronto-based curator Noa Bronstein with the premise of inviting contemporary artists to create artworks in response to the existing narratives upheld by local historic house museums. The inaugural *Memories of the Future* (2014) with artists Sara Angelucci, Robert Hengeveld, Eleanor King and Matt Macintosh, took place at the Gibson House Museum, a brick farmhouse surrounded by rapid urban development, located in North York, Toronto. For *Memories of the Future II* (2015) with artists Aleesa Cohene and Bambitchell (Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell), we worked with the Campbell House Museum, in the oldest surviving building from the Town of York, now located just steps from Queen Street and University Avenue, one of the busiest intersections in downtown Toronto. Through these site-responsive exhibitions, the artists explored broad concepts tied to home and heritage such as how gendered divisions of labour are inscribed in the archive and the objects found in museum collections, or how claims of authenticity are intertwined with the telling of certain stories. They also examined and expanded on context-specific histories, past and present. For example, the connection of the Gibson House’s past apple orchard with colonization and rapid urban expansion, or the legal history of the Campbell House and the settlement of York, Upper Canada, in relation to the contemporary Anti-terrorism Act of 2015.

The success of the Toronto exhibitions pointed to a seemingly endless number of stories, histories, and connections encoded in these types of domestic spaces, which are peppered across the country from coast to coast.

tell remain underexamined. Vancouver—nicknamed the “City of Glass,” after Douglas Coupland’s book of the same name, published in 2000—is a place frequently lamented for tearing down its heritage to build anew (notably in the



Left. Matt Macintosh, *Real Estates*, 2014, installation view of *Memories of the Future* (2014). Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Right. Aleesa Cohene, *Ready to Cope*, 2016 and Bambitchell, *Sashay Away*, 2015, installation view of *Memories of the Future II* (2015). Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Curated independently, *Memories of the Future III* (2018) with artists Diyan Achjadi and Cindy Mochizuki took place in Vancouver at the Roedde House and was the third and final iteration of this curatorial investigation. In this exhibition, I built on the foundational ideas developed with Bronstein over four years of research and the two prior co-curated exhibitions in Toronto, but looked to a new context. The Roedde House Museum and its Vancouver setting presented the opportunity to work within the unique heritage constraints of this city, a place where the complexities of house museums and the stories they

dominant steel-and-glass architectural aesthetic identifiable with downtown Vancouver). There is a comparatively small number of house museums in the Metro Vancouver area compared with the GTA. Yet, tucked away in a quiet, tree-lined West End neighbourhood, a restored-house-turned-museum fits into the surrounding heritage buildings and gardens of Barclay Heritage Square, where an entire city block was acquired and preserved to create “an oasis of green amidst surrounding concrete high-rises.”<sup>5</sup> Here I encountered a museum with a small staff and a volunteer board willing to take on this project and open

their space to critical investigation and artistic scrutiny in order to think differently about their official history and approach to museology.

Now the Roedde House Museum, this 1893 heritage home originally housed the aforementioned Gustav Roedde and his family. Run by the Roedde House Preservation

remembering of one moment in the building's long history, which over the years housed many more individuals, most of whose stories have gone unrecorded. The evolving functions and occupants of the residence, which operated for years as a boarding house, serve as a reminder of the innumerable untold histories of other buildings that were



Left. Bambitchell, *Sashay Away*, 2015, and *Where the Trees Stood in Water*, 2013, installation view of *Memories of the Future II* (2015). Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Right. Installation view of Cindy Mochizuki's *Sue Sada Was Here* (2018) with a Roedde family portrait in foreground, *Memories of the Future III* (2018). Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

Society, the museum serves the local community with public tours, lectures, concerts, and school programs. Unlike many historic house museums, including the Gibson House and Campbell House, the rooms are not roped off and much of the collection can be handled. This engaging and audience-friendly approach to display furthers the illusion that visitors have entered into the Roedde's family home rather than a carefully constructed, staged



demolished and of other people whose stories were hidden, ignored or never written down.

Both the artists took the museum's print history, including the Roeddes' successful printing business and the decorative arts typical of the late nineteenth century, as a starting point for their artwork. The resulting exhibition included a commissioned experimental dance film by Mochizuki and a series of prints and a collection of textile

artworks by Achjadi. Inserting their art within the period rooms, the artists interrupted the museum's dominant story of a middle-class European immigrant family and spoke to Canada's difficult colonial history, which continues to shape the nation's present.

leading to a parallel world. In this film, *Sue Sada Was Here* (2018)—which was shot in one, hot July afternoon inside the museum—Cindy Mochizuki channels the spirit of Muriel Kitagawa (1912–1974).



Left. Cindy Mochizuki, *Sue Sada Was Here*, 2018, installation view of *Memories of the Future III* (2018). Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

Right. Cindy Mochizuki, *Sue Sada Was Here*, 2018, film still. Courtesy of the artist.

Visitors to the Roedde House during the fall of 2018 were greeted by the faint murmur of a woman's voice ("December 14, 1941. ...The occupation comes.... Dear Wes, just to let you know plans have changed a bit. ..."), the rustle of pages, and the subtle sounds of a piano being played. On an antique sideboard in the parlour sat a large flat-screen television monitor. Incongruous as this modern technology might have appeared amidst the ornate nineteenth century furnishings, the tv seemed to almost disappear, transformed instead into a portal

Kitagawa, a Nisei (second-generation Japanese Canadian) writer, detailed her life and the Canadian government's policies towards Japanese and Japanese Canadians during the pre- and post-war periods in Vancouver. In her texts, which include published works, unedited manuscripts, and personal letters to her brother Wes, she documented the racism and fear present in Vancouver during this time. Her recorded experiences, which correspond chronologically to the period of the Roedde family's publishing activities, never directly intersected with the lives or

Diyani Achjadi, *Home Invasion (Curfew)*, 1999, installation view of *Memories of the Future III*. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

work of this German immigrant family, and yet these loose threads of connection serve as reminders of the uncounted houses and histories lost not just to time but also to discrimination. “My children will not remember the first violence of feeling—the intense bitterness I felt—but they know that a house was lost through injustice.”

In Mochizuki’s film, a cast of ten Japanese Canadian women, ages 8 to 85, embody Sue Sada, one of Kitagawa’s pen names. The film begins as a young girl peers through the bay window of the parlour, looking in. Upon entering, she travels through the house, where women in each room engage in intricate choreography between books and body. Books are carried, passed, thrown, stacked, walked upon, and, in one powerful scene, pressed between the women like links between generations. One woman works at a typewriter, with countless sheets of written words floating to the ground around her. These pages are even-



tually inserted into the books, many with marbled covers, and as the music and movement intensify, the books are passed frantically between women, falling until they cover the floor. The film ends on a haunting, whispered note: “... What is their real life like?”

As the artist explains, “the performers use books as objects of print history that can omit histories of violence and colonialism,” and through their presence these women re-inscribe the spirit of Sue Sada as “ghosts of the future.”<sup>6</sup> In her guest essay, writer Caoimhe Morgan-Feir detailed how Mochizuki transformed words into movement and how in this poetic interpretation “much of the source material is left unknown and unknowable,” which makes evident “that, on some level, every act of translation carries with it an act of loss.”<sup>7</sup>

Further blurring the bounds of eras and histories, Achjadi re-contextualized works that she made in the late 1990s into the Roedde House’s domestic interior. In *Untitled (handkerchiefs)* (1998), Achjadi tells the story of another woman, the artist’s Indonesian grandmother Adimah, who died in 1949 during Indonesia’s war for independence from Dutch colonizers. She did not die at arms, but as a result of an asthma attack when the government-imposed curfew prevented her from receiving necessary medical care. In this body of work, Achjadi transfers faded images of her grandmother onto handkerchiefs gifted to her from her maternal grandmother Hilda, an English-Canadian woman. Paired with *Home Invasion* (1999), a second series of altered handkerchiefs with delicately embroidered militaristic imagery of guns, soldiers and camouflage, these textiles illuminate an uncomfortable link between the presumed safety of home and militarized violence inflicted on certain communities under colonialism. As Morgan-Feir explained, “they may seem seductive from a distance, with their pretty colours, fabrics and careful needlework, but examined up close they shift” and set within the private spaces of the upper-floor bedrooms,

“their delicate nature belies the dangerous weapons and devastating histories they capture.”<sup>8</sup>



Diyan Achjadi, *Java Toile (Roedde House Redux—Delicate)* (2018), *Java Toile (Roedde House Redux—Rouge)* (2018) and *Umbilicus* (1998), installation view of *Memories of the Future III*. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

Responding to the museum’s decorative arts, Achjadi also revisited her 2015 print *Java Toile*. In this wallpaper, she interweaves Javanese and Chinese imagery into a “Toile de Jouy”-inspired pattern of absurd scenes with all-too-real references: objects encountered in international museums that showcase allegorical representations of different continents exoticized for the pleasure of European audiences. Critiquing imagery commonly inscribed on domestic objects made and circulated during the height of European colonial expansion and invasion, Achjadi’s pastoral scenes turn orientalism on its head. Women wearing extraordinary animal hats, animal-human hybrids, dead and taxidermied animals are all set within floating

islands of Javanese-inspired landscapes. *Java Toile (Roedde House Redux)* (2018) takes this earlier work and blends these vignettes with patterns taken directly off the walls of the Roedde House. Mixing these period wallpaper designs with her *Java Toile* imagery complicates the perceived neutrality of a floral pattern and draws attention to historical assumptions of European superiority that characterized imperialism in Canada and abroad. Decorating the walls of many of the rooms in the house, these digital prints invited close inspection and created subtle shifts to the carefully staged mise-en-scènes.

Exhibiting in a historic home, a markedly different space from the white cube of a gallery, Achjadi and Mochizuki’s artworks reverberated deeply, their messages punctuated by the domestic surroundings. It takes time to dismantle “histories that have become as solid as walls”<sup>9</sup> and build something more flexible, more open, and more inclusive. Through their art, Achjadi and Mochizuki contributed to this critical process. With still and moving images, they told powerful stories to animate this heritage building in a new way and decentralize the established history of European settlement. As Morgan-Feir concluded, the artists “revive spirits and lost souls, bringing them back so that we have a chance to better listen to their stories.”<sup>10</sup> In doing so, both artists engaged in “cross-cultural contamination,” a phrase Achjadi has used, whereby visual and textual stories from many people, places and times intersect and intermingle with each other. Their artworks exposed the codes and motivations that influence such spaces, from their framing to their furnishings. Subtle and poetic, they quietly insert and assert the presence of other people, cultures, and histories. In their hands, “memories of the distant past are newly exposed, interpreted and remembered.”<sup>11</sup>

It was fitting to conclude this curatorial investigation with an exhibition focused on books since the title itself, *Memories of the Future*, comes from a text that went unpub-

lished for many decades. As Bronstein and I summarized in the second exhibition text:

*Memories of the Future* borrows its title from a controversial collection of essays by Ukrainian-born writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky. Written in the 1920s, Krzhizhanovsky's subversive essays were censored by Soviet authorities. It was not until well after his death that his works were republished to critical acclaim. As the namesake suggests, the exhibition *Memories of the Future* offers a form of cultural excavation that attempts to uncover and give voice to buried stories and forgotten histories.<sup>12</sup>

From a contemporary art perspective, these museums are challenging sites with an imposing environment, but these conditions have also made them rewarding sites for exhibition. These small institutions offer a valuable opportunity to reach new audiences, including people who might never enter a traditional space for contemporary art. Moreover, it is impossible to hide from how history has been inscribed when touring a Canadian historic house museum. In thinking about how to approach the domestic anew, this project highlights the deeply political connection between the interior space memorialized in the staging of a historic house—a particular, patriarchal ideal of the domestic rooted in nineteenth century values—and exterior social conditions and decisions that built a normative understanding of “Canada.” Working within this tension between interior and exterior, *Memories of the Future* contributes to a body of curatorial work that aims to expand and rewrite the documented, dominant history in this country by unsettling familiar concepts of home. ¶



Diyan Achjadi, *Java Toile (Roedde House Redux—Trophy)*, 2018, installation view of *Memories of the Future III*. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

1. Noa Bronstein, “The Just Present Past: A Survey of the Historic House Museum & Future Applications of the Model,” *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 6, no. 4 (2014): 2.
2. “Queen Anne Revival 1886–1995,” *Vancouver Heritage Foundation*, <https://www.vancouverheritagefoundation.org/house-styles/queen-anne-revival/> (retrieved June 21, 2019).
3. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 147.
4. *Ibid.*
5. “Barclay Heritage Square,” *National Trust for Canada*, <https://archive.national-trustcanada.ca/visit-discover/find-historic-places/saved-places/barclay-heritage-square> (retrieved March 22, 2020).
6. Cindy Mochizuki, artist statement, (2018).
7. Caoimhe Morgan-Feir, “Finding Gaps and Ghosts,” *Memories of the Future* digital catalogue (2018), 11.
8. Morgan-Feir, 14.
9. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 1.
10. Morgan-Feir, 14.
11. Noa Bronstein and Katherine Dennis, “Memories of the Future,” exhibition essay (2014).
12. Noa Bronstein and Katherine Dennis, “Memories of the Future II,” exhibition essay (2015).