



House of Dreams



By Penelope Bartlau & Barking Spider Visual Theatre. Fairhall Exhibition House, The Johnston Collection, Melbourne. 12 July – 20 September 2016.

The Johnston Collection of Georgian, Regency and Louis XV paintings, furniture, *objet d'art* and bric-a-brac is held at 'Fairhall', an 1860s house in East Melbourne. Now a private museum, it was the house of William Johnston (1911-1986), an antique dealer and collector. He bequeathed his Collection and the house to the people of Victoria 'as a place of historical and educational interest'. He wished for his collection to be accessible – no velvet ropes and restricted areas – and for it to be regularly rearranged, which it has been - most recently by an

architect, various designers, artists and a milliner.

Now Penelope Bartlau and her Barking Spider team – sound designer Darius Kedros, designer and lighting designer Jason Lehane, and artist Kyoko Imazu – take their turn, initially inspired by Carl Jung's theories about the dream symbolism of the inner world, 'where houses reflect the person that they contain/are'. In this Barking Spider manifestation, each room of Fairhall contains a dream – or a dreamscape – a series of installations that can be at first baffling, or eerie, or frightening or even weirdly funny. They have taken items from Johnston's Collection and reconfigured and repurposed them, adding specially made objects and sound recordings to create other and unexpected layers of 'historical and educational interest'.

The bleached bones and skulls of horses spill from a high, dark wood chest of drawers. A small forest of vaguely menacing bright red flowers with phallic yellow stamens bristles. You look up: the same flowers are suspended from a skylight, pointing down at you like a trap. As crickets chirp in the night, a window is blanked out by a huge rabbit and sinister plants that overlook an iron bed. (Rabbits, cartoony but sinister, are a recurring motif.) The hairs rise on the back of your neck. Across the hallway, the limbs and heads of dismembered dolls push out of holes in brown paper packages tied up with string. The imagery is clear and sickening. You look away.

Downstairs, a room that transports you in a single breath back into the past. A dinner table, set for a formal dinner – candelabra, crystal, gold embossed plates and heavy cutlery. You become aware of the murmur of talk, the clink of glass and crockery – and suddenly this empty room is peopled.

You stand in each of the rooms (almost certainly wishing that there were fewer and quieter people with you) and let the objects, their arrangements and the sounds do their work. Best not to puzzle overmuch: let the associations and meanings seep into your understanding via emotion. In corners, easy to miss, brief poems illuminate but do not explain the tableaux. The poems, by Ms Bartlau, may seem elliptical but in context are piercing.



And with these poems, as in her previous work, she demonstrates her originality in word, sound and image: they come at you from the periphery of your understanding only to reveal something which you realise you already dimly know but which now has become suddenly clear and moving.

If you're in Melbourne or intend to be before the 20th of September, you can have a guided tour through this extraordinarily imaginative and evocative creation. But you can't just roll up and knock on the door – and in any case the address is not advertised. Telephone +61 3 9416 2515 or email info@johnstoncollection.org and make a booking – and then follow instructions.

Michael Brindley

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