Murmurs of Mr. Johnston: Rosslynd Piggot and the Johnston Collection

William Robert Johnston (1911-86) was an antique dealer, art collector and aesthete who ran his principal business, Kent Antiques, in High Street, Armadale from 1971 until his death. He acquired the East Melbourne property Cadzow (1860) in 1952, remodelling it to create the appearance of a late eighteenth century Georgian-style townhouse, and renamed it Fairhall. Johnston left the property and its contents to the people of Victoria as a small house-museum, “a place of historical and educational interest”, as he put it. An independent charitable Trust was established in 1986 to preserve and develop this unique collection, expressive of one man’s personal taste and love of fine objects. The Johnston Collection formally opened to the public on November 19th, 1990.

Born in Lilydale, the only child of Robert Alexander Johnston, a boot-maker, Johnston’s young life was transformed when he was around eight years-old. His maternal grandmother, Mary Theresa Friedrichs, presented him with a Minton teacup (c.1812-15), but without the saucer. That London shape cup, with its delicate ‘chicken bone’ handle, remains in the Collection today and is regarded as one of its most treasured pieces. This gift could be said to have inspired the course of Johnston’s life; collecting would become both his passion and his business. Or, to put it more romantically, perhaps Johnston embarked on a life-long quest to reunite his little cup with the elusive missing saucer?

At fourteen, Johnston left school and secured work as a window dresser at the fashionable Melbourne department store Buckley & Nunn (acquired by its rival David Jones in 1982). In March, 1947, Johnston departed for England intending to establish a career in antiques dealing there. He soon discovered the extent to which the privations of World War II had diminished the country and rent a hole in the existing social fabric. After speculatively knocking on the doors of several country houses, Johnston found that the landed gentry, faced with new post-war taxes and maintenance costs, were disposed to discreetly sell their antiques to a willing buyer. Johnston initially established himself in a three-storey shop in Greenwich and began to ship the goods back to Australia in container loads, later moving his operations to a larger warehouse.
In 1972, Johnston suffered a heart attack, an event that gave him pause to consider the future of his already sprawling and beloved collection. It was at this time he spoke to a solicitor friend, John Rogan, about bequeathing it to the State, which raised the issue of finding a permanent home in which to display it. This was undoubtedly the motivation for Johnston’s decision to return to Melbourne permanently, and gradually transfer his Greenwich collection to Fairhall. A gardening enthusiast, Johnston also acquired the country property Chandpara (an Urdu word meaning ‘Silver Home’), an 800 acre property and study at Tylden near Woodend, in 1977. Formerly the residence of Dr. Arnold Caddy (1866-1948), the property in many ways fulfilled Johnston’s aspirations towards the English country-house ideal, and the bucolic lifestyle he wished to emulate as the gentleman-in-residence.

Johnston greatly enjoyed the process of decorating and re-dressing within his properties over the years, arranging little feature corners and vignettes, as he did at Kent Antiques. He reputedly sold many items from Fairhall informally, as the gentle domestic setting helped clients imagine the objects in their own home. Ever the savvy businessman, if Johnston had something he thought would suit a particular collector, that person might well be invited to dinner, and a sale negotiated. This spirit of interpretation and change Johnston enjoyed about his collection remains a central tenet of how it is administered today; not as a static or moribund group of objects, but as a dynamic assemblage. Over the years a number of individuals with similar professions and interests to Johnston and his circle have been invited to bring their own responses to Fairhall and the Collection. Of those, Laurie Carew OAM, the former visual merchandising manager at the original ‘Georges’ store (which closed in 1995), and fellow antiques dealer Francis Dunn were Johnston’s friends.

These days, The Johnston Collection program divides the year into three distinct periods and themes. ‘Mr. Johnston and his Collection’ (March-June) invites a guest arranger who works only with the permanent collection; these have included Primrose, Lady Potter, AC, Lynne Landy (wife of the former Governor of Victoria John Landy), interior designer Caroline Touzeau, and theatre designer Shaun Gurton. ‘The House of Ideas’ (July-October) asks a guest curator to work within Fairhall who may bring in other items, or introduce new ways of working with or seeing the Collection, and ‘to make old new again’. The series aims to attract new audiences to the venue, and recent participants such as fashion designers Akira Isogawa (2010), Luke Sales and Anna Plunkett (of Romance Was Born), and architect Pascale Gomes-McNabb (both 2012) have certainly raised its profile. The annual ‘Christmas at The Johnston Collection’ (November-February) engages creatives from around Victoria who work to produce pieces based on Johnston’s life and collection.

“The premise of ‘Mr. Johnston and his Collection’ is evocative, and the ‘House of Ideas’ can be assumed to be a bit more provocative in its response to the Collection. We perceive that our role as a museum is to encourage audiences to think about and see objects in new ways”, agrees Louis Le Vaillant, Director of the Collection since late 2008. “To continually think about the Collection and collecting, to think about versions of the past, versions of the present and of the future, to honour the practices, techniques and styles of the past while also anticipating and embracing progress and development”. The latest installment of the ‘House of Ideas’ sees Melbourne artist Rosslynd Piggott curate the Collection, which she has titled ‘Murmur (until 23 October, 2013). “Rosslynd has a well-established and well-developed history of Ideas’ sees Melbourne artist Rosslynd Piggott curate the Collection, which she has titled ‘Murmur (until 23 October, 2013). “Rosslynd has a well-established and well-developed history of Ideas’ sees Melbourne artist Rosslynd Piggott curate the Collection, which she has titled ‘Murmur (until 23 October, 2013). “Rosslynd has a well-established and well-developed history of Ideas’ sees Melbourne artist Rosslynd Piggott curate the Collection, which she has titled ‘Murmur (until 23 October, 2013). “Rosslynd has a well-established and well-developed history of Ideas’ sees Melbourne artist Rosslynd Piggott curate the Collection, which she has titled ‘Murmur (until 23 October, 2013). “Rosslynd has a well-established and well-developed history of Ideas’ sees Melbourne 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new energy and new insights into a collection. This is a very subtle, complex and engaging process …”

Piggott has dedicated a number of the rooms to their principal former occupants, using archive photos and other visual aids to convey what the experience of life at Fairhall might have been like. “One of the biggest challenges was attempting to deal with the delicacy of the emotional layers of the history … each room is very dense in such association”, she admits. “The next was visualising the spaces. I did not start with empty spaces. Every time I visited there was another tour [of the residence]. So I needed to look at the spaces and objects, somehow obliterating them and beginning with my own possible versions. This really messed with my head … I mean lots of sleepless nights. I often worked at 4am … The thinking about this is constant, and yet some of the most important moves happened during the install week”.

Johnston had a substantial property portfolio and owned as many as thirty-six rental properties in the East Melbourne area. Following his acquisition of Fairhall, Johnston had the interior converted into three rental flats, and one of the first tenants was set and costume designer Angus Winneke (1911-82). Winneke worked for the Tivoli Theatre, and his archive is preserved as part of the Performing Arts Collection at the Arts Centre, Melbourne. He would also work part-time at Kent Antiques when Johnston was overseas, bringing his visual flair to the displays. Winneke moved from Fairhall in 1966 to another Johnston property around the corner in Gipps Street, where he lived until his death. The Yellow Drawing Room upstairs has been arranged as Winneke’s domain with facsimiles of his costume sketches and stage designs on the walls and tables, along with photos of the productions, and a black and white head-shot of the man himself displayed on a coffee table.

Former Director of the Collection (2000-08), the late Nina Stanton, undertook substantial research into Johnston’s life and movements. According to her chronology, in 1963 Johnston went on a buying trip to Egypt where he met his future colleague and companion Ahmed Moussa Abo al Maaty. In 1965, Moussa spent his school holidays working in the Greenwich warehouse, and later visited Melbourne with Johnston for three months in 1968. In 1976, three years after Johnston had returned to Melbourne to live, Moussa relocated to Australia permanently to become his assistant, and Fairhall became their main abode until Johnston’s death. “The connections between the three men have indeed been very close, tender and helpful in each others lives… It seemed they made their own ‘family’, loved, protected and cared for each other, in a way that was productive for all of them”, Piggott relates. “I wanted to honour these emotional connections, the role of devotion, perhaps more than the objects, as these had not been spoken about so much, and were such a vivid and important part of Johnston’s history and success. At the same time, I did not want to spell this out. Gentle, respectful and even subliminal communication through the images was very important”.

Piggott produced a number of new works in response to the Collection, including Splinter-Garden (2012-13) a loop of filmed footage of flowers in the garden at Fairhall. This is projected onto the ceiling of the Green Drawing Room through an English glass chandelier (c.1820), reputedly acquired by Johnston from the Maharajah of Tagore during a buying trip to India. “I have worked with a projected image of a chandelier in a past installation, Palace (1990). It belonged to antiques dealer Graham Geddes who allowed me to photograph an extraordinary chandelier made from uncut crystal; such a mysterious and beautiful object. I projected it (larger than life) onto suspended gauze, so it appeared to hover and sway in the darkened gallery space”, Piggott recalls. “Johnston’s nineteenth century piece is made of cut crystal, so it became an excellent device for shattering light, being projected images of his magnolia and ice camellias”.

A series of nine digital prints, also titled Murmur (2013), range throughout the property, providing an almost ghostly counterpart to the physical objects they represent. “[These] were made as a result of looking through the Collection archives. I came across rather beautiful large-scale negatives of the interiors of Fairhall under the first directorship [of Judith Thompson, 1989-91]. These interiors were very ordered and classical. Louis gave me permission to use these negatives to produce new work. The layering of these images produced surprising new spaces that are akin to layers of memory, floating time and space”, Piggott comments. She also found points of common ground with Johnston’s love of mirrors and reflective surfaces, and has hung some of her earlier works in the White Room, and upstairs in the Study, and Sitting Room. “I have long enjoyed glass and mirrors, particularly those that do not reflect perfectly. I have included some of my own double mirrors in the house made by slumping glass, they appear molten and fluid, as a way of emphasising connections between seeing and sensing, presence and absence”.

Johnston’s collection of paintings includes two important works he acquired from the Kimbolton Castle sale in 1949, the family seat of the Earts and later Dukes of Manchester from 1615. One work, by Mary Beale (1632-99), a former student of the court painter Sir Peter Lely (1618-80) depicts a lady of the Montagu family (1683). This is possibly Lady Anne
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This desire to articulate the unspoken through objects and images permeates Murmur, speaking to us softly of a man who strived for graciousness and beauty in his life, and of his friends who shared it. “Rosslynd’s response, while of course loaded with her strong visual sense of place and object, was more extraordinary for her sensibility of person and recalling of the past of the people who had, through our museum practice been written out. So, the opportunity to curate that narrative through archives, items and her interventions was exceptional for us and indeed our audiences”, Le Vaillant believes. For the artist who has been immersed within Johnston’s world so intensely, there is a sense that the experience will continue to linger, “The possibility to work with an entire house and its collection was totally beguiling. To have the opportunity to work with a collection in a very close and intimate way is a special and rare privilege … working with The Johnston Collection to make Murmur has been an extraordinary experience …”, Piggott reflects. “Strange and challenging, as the task has hovered in an unfixed zone, somewhere between historical interpretation and installation. I do enjoy such unfixed zones; fragile and risky”.

The Johnston Collection, can be visited by booking at – johnstoncollection.org
Rosslynd Piggott is represented in Victoria by Sutton Gallery, Fitzroy – suttongallery.com.au
Artist site – rosslyndpiggott.com

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