



MURMUR (MÛR'MER)

An installation by Rosslind Piggott

2 | 2

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Murmur (mûr'mer)

- n. 1. A low, indistinct, continuous sound: *spoke in a murmur; the murmur of the waves.*
2. An indistinct, whispered, or confidential complaint; a mutter.
3. *Medicine* An abnormal sound, usually emanating from the heart, that sometimes indicates a diseased condition.

AN INSTALLATION BY ROSSLIND PIGGOTT, THE JOHNSTON COLLECTION, 2013. A murmur is by definition an elusive thing, existing in the periphery. Like a shadow or an imprint, the more one attempts to grasp it, the more ephemeral it becomes, its force residing in the realm of suggestion or evocation rather than that of the literal or figurative.

When artist Rosslind Piggott turned her attentions to Fairhall, the 1860 townhouse once inhabited by Melbourne antiques dealer William Johnston, and today housing his collection of 18th and 19th century furniture and objets d'art, it was this sense of the unknowable that most intrigued her. As she researched Johnston and his collection—examining the photograph albums, the folios of letters and postcards, as well as the collection itself—it was the ellipses, the pauses, the unspoken traces that seemed to harbour the most profound insights into Johnston's life. Piggott would make numerous visits to the collection over the following months, selecting objects and artworks, and spending hours quietly absorbing the house's atmosphere.

It was in 2010, at the opening of an arrangement by fashion designer Akira Isogawa, that Piggott first encountered The Johnston Collection. Enthralled by the sensuality of Isogawa's interpretation of the space and his emphasis on its dreamlike qualities, Piggott began to consider the possibilities that Fairhall might hold for a contemporary artist. Particularly appealing was the freedom and flexibility afforded by the nature of Johnston's bequest. As a dealer first and foremost, Johnston was interested in the ways in which people live with things, rather than in any intellectualised notion of aesthetic perfection. His approach was more practical than reverent, and accordingly the trust stipulated that the collection should be regularly rearranged, and that it be displayed without ropes or barriers. Visitors are thus able to move freely among the objects, as if in a domestic setting, without the layers of formality and distance usually present in the museum experience.

While few institutions have the benefit of such an accommodating bequest, the contemporary artist's intervention has become an increasingly prevalent motif of house museum curatorship in recent years. From the grandiose, controversial installation of Jeff Koons' seventeen sculptures at the Palace of Versailles in 2008, to Eimsgreen and Dragset's understated and darkly witty constructed interiors, *Tomorrow*, exhibited earlier this year at the Victoria & Albert, the barriers between public and private, history and invention, connoisseurship and kitsch, have been continuously tested, manipulated and undermined. The essentially fictitious nature of the house museum is a notion that preoccupied Piggott from the outset of her project. In this curiously hybrid space, the needs of history must be balanced against those of aesthetics, the desires of visitors against those of curators and artists, and amongst all of this are the often complex needs of the objects themselves, for the most part, never intended for mass exposure.

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Murmur is not Piggott's first experience of incorporating museum objects into her practice. In 1993-1994, her major installation, *Double Breath (contained) of the Sitter*, at the National Gallery of Victoria saw her works symbolically interspersed amongst a selection of stockings, gloves and other corporeally and emotionally resonant objects sourced from the gallery's Fashion and Textile and Decorative Arts departments. Evoking

The Johnston Collection is one that plays as much upon the notion of spirit as upon the material object. The eight rooms that house the collection, as well as the spaces between them, are curated with an emphasis on emotional affect. Several rooms have been symbolically 'restored' to their original purpose, and while their arrangements and contents may differ from those present during Johnston's lifetime, a sense of these spaces' history and the lives lived within them is captured.

Particular attention has been devoted to Johnston's relationship with Ahmed Moussa, his Egyptian-born assistant/companion with whom he passed more than 20 years of his life. The upstairs bedroom, where Ahmed slept during Johnston's lifetime, is all but filled with a carved four-poster bed, on which two toilet mirrors are positioned facing one another, reflections cast infinitely back and forth between them. The effect is both intimate and curiously poignant. In a new work, *From B to A, in Colonial Knot*, the trailing thread of a pillow embroidered with Johnston's initial disappears beneath the bed, symbolically connecting this space to his own bedroom, directly below, where the thread of a matching pillow, embroidered with Ahmed's initial, winds up to meet it. Conceived by Piggott and worked by one of the collection's guides and former president of the Embroiderers Guild, Dorothy Morgan, the work alludes quietly to the ever-present themes of private affection and public propriety.

Drawing upon the potent olfactory link to memory, Piggott has scented the room with sandalwood, its warm, woody fragrance providing an additional air of comfort and envelopment. In the adjoining upstairs sitting room, an 18th century portrait attributed to Joseph Highmore has been draped in muslin. The delicate fall of the fabric obscures the sitter's face while framing her hands, one holding a rose, the other gesturing to it.

Across the landing, a gentleman's study has become a place of melancholy, the flickering chandelier, suspended awkwardly low, barely illuminating engravings of ruins and biblical battle-scenes. The mood of the Yellow Room opposite is altogether lighter—this has been restored to its original use as the flat of Johnston's friend, Angus Winneke. The sketches and photographs displayed here are taken from Winneke's successful career as a set and costume designer at the Tivoli Theatre. Throughout Fairhall, contemporary furniture has been sparingly introduced to reflect Johnston's own taste for juxtaposing the modern against the antique, and here a golden *Landscape* chaise longue by Jeffrey Burnett for B&B Italia is deliciously modish against the black and white checkered floor.

The division of Fairhall into flats during Johnston's lifetime is in itself telling. For all of his conspicuous social and financial aspiration, Johnston's relationship with luxury was an uneasy one. He would happily commit a month's income to a piece of porcelain, but he did his weekly shopping at the Queen Victoria Market at the end of the day, snapping up wilting vegetables for pennies. He purchased an extensive country property and filled it with valuable antiques, but refused to turn the heating on. This combination of decadence and austerity has, perhaps, its own air of affectation, its own particular pedigree derived from the lifestyle of the faded English aristocracy, bumping around the family pile in thrice-darned socks. Whether Johnston emulated this model knowingly is anyone's guess; his motives, like his relationships, remain elusive. The company he kept was far from aristocratic, and he lacked the education to acquaint himself with the great literary collectors and connoisseurs on whom many better-renowned 20th century aesthetes modelled their tastes and behaviours.

The curious tension between ostentation and parsimony is most emphatically expressed in the rooms downstairs. Here, one moves from the cell-like simplicity of Johnston's bedroom, with its single bed and unhung stack of portraits facing the wall, to the extraordinary glamour of an adjacent all-white sitting room, complete with polar bear rug and walls of gilded rococo mirrors. A 2009 work by Piggott, *Mirror, Mirror*, is introduced here—a sensuous, tactile pairing of oil and palladium leaf on linen and slumped mirrored glass. This is a place of egotism and indulgence, both seductive and softly unnerving. A tipped-over teacup and scatter of playing cards on the floor seem to suggest Johnston's famous temper. The juxtaposition of the porcelain lip of the cup against the fringe of bear fur evokes, surprisingly and pleasingly, the surrealist incongruity of Meret Oppenheim's *Déjeuner en Fourrure*. A stark, plastered fireplace, framed with fluted marble columns, becomes a stage set for three 19th century mythological Parian ware figures. This white on white tableau was Piggott's first intervention into the space, its curiously harmonious juxtaposition of understated, even minimalist palette and decorative historicism setting the tone for much of what is to follow.



In the Green Drawing Room, the largest and usually the grandest room in Fairhall, Piggott has created two sections. At one end, a clustered installation of furniture and objects evokes Johnston's workshop. An upended rosewood sofa table seems curiously personified, its curving legs directed vulnerably ceilingward, making visible its more recent pine additions. In this gently revealing arrangement, even the furniture seems to be surrendering its secrets. At the other end of the room, the 18th century mahogany dining table is set for a formal dinner. Directly above it, Piggott has produced a video work, which draws upon the flowering magnolia tree in the courtyard beyond. The work is projected through an elaborate multi-tiered chandelier, in such a way that its shadows and refractions become part of the shifting, transforming image. A suspended forest of crystal lustres glitters in shades of pink and green.

The series of new printed works that Piggott has produced in conjunction with her arrangement maintain this haunting sense of the fragmentary. Overlaying archival photographs (many in the negative state) with her own contemporary photographs of blossoms and leaves taken in the garden of Fairhall, Piggott creates glimpses and suggestions of overlapping spaces and overlapping lives. In *Murmur—Magnolia Soulangiana*, a magnolia appears phantasmically suspended in the canopy of Johnston's four-poster bed. The brocaded draperies and patterned rugs of the bedroom merge and layer with the dense foliage of the garden and the subtle gradations of pink and white in the curving petals of the flower. In *Murmur—Vacances en Paris*, Johnston himself appears, posing awkwardly at the Tulleries before Etienne-Jules Ramey's monumental, menacing sculpture of Theseus and the Minotaur.

An overlaid darkened interior with towering grandfather clock lends an additional aura of *memento mori*. The effect of negative silvering present in many of these images is at once luxurious and ghostly.

Throughout the house, Piggott provides momentary glimpses of comfort and whimsy. The kitchen is more traditionally decorated with oak, rustic Staffordshire figures and blue and white porcelain. A half-landing bathroom has become an aviary, a veritable rainforest of vibrant 19th century porcelain birds set against a 1960s wallpaper of silvered palm fronds. A Chinese urn potted with living orchids has been introduced here—a simultaneous gesture to Piggott's enduring love of these fragile flowers, and to Johnston's enthusiasm for gardening. Travel was an essential aspect of Johnston's life as an antiques dealer, and in the landing, a selection of vintage suitcases (lent by the collection's guides and volunteers) have been stacked to suggest a recent, or upcoming, journey.

Yet despite its extensive preparatory research and numerous allusions to past events and lives, Piggott's arrangement never lapses into the realm of simple biography. For every reference to some factual aspect of Johnston's life at Fairhall, Piggott introduces a note of uncertainty; like the new photographic works produced in conjunction with the arrangement, every tableau is veiled, shadowed or overlaid with alternative meaning. Integral to this project is the acknowledgement of memory's fallibility, of the ways in which histories are written and rewritten. *Murmur* is a deeply affecting intervention, both tender and incisive, that slips delicately between desire and denial, opulence and restraint, love and bitterness, and emerges as a coherent and immersive meditation on the complex, shifting nature of remembrance, in all its materiality and immateriality.

Image Credits:

Image 01. Detail—The White Room. Photo by John Brash.

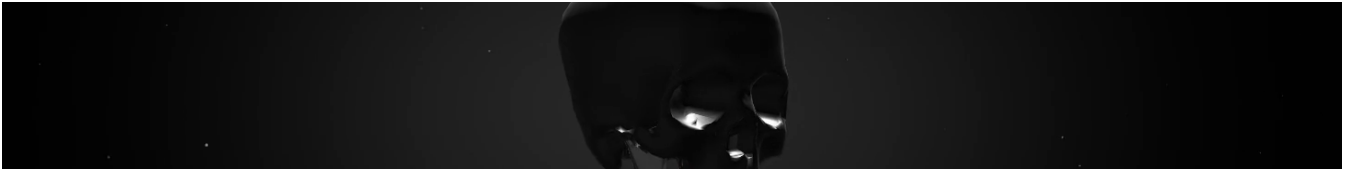
Image 02. Ahmed's bedroom, including *From B to A in Colonial Knot*, 2013. 2 x embroidered pillowcases and connecting thread. Embroidery by Dorothy Morgan. Photo by John Brash.

Image 03. *Spilinter—Garden 2012—2013* DVD loop projected through 19th century English chandelier in the Green Drawing Room. Photo by John Brash.

Image 04. *Murmur—Magnolia Soulangiana*, 2013. Digital print on Hahnemulle paper. Edition of 5, series of nine prints, *Murmur*. Photo by John Brash.

Image 05. *Mirror, mirror no. 1* 2008—2009. Oil and palladium leaf on linen, hand slumped, sandblasted and mirrored glass. Photo by John Brash.

Image 06. Detail—The Green Room. Photo by John Brash.



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